

桜庭一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba

GOSICKS

—ゴシックエス— 春來たる死神

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角川ビーンズ文庫

GosickS - Volume 01 - The Reaper Who Comes in Spring

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prologue

Rapunzel grew into the most beautiful child under the sun. When she was twelve years old, the enchantress shut her into a tower, which lay in a forest, and had neither stairs nor door, but quite at the top was a little window. When the enchantress wanted to go in, she placed herself beneath it and cried:

‘Rapunzel, Rapunzel,
Let down your hair to me.’

The Brothers Grimm. “Rapunzel.” Grimms’ Fairy Tales. Trans. Edgar Taylor and Marian Edwardes.

Cast of Characters:

Kazuya KUJOU – A foreign student from an island country in the Orient; the protagonist of this volume.

Victorique – A girl who possesses a wellspring of wisdom.

Gréville DE BLOIS – A police inspector.

Avril BRADLEY – An exchange student from England.

Cécile – A teacher.

GosickS I — The Reaper Who Comes in Spring

Prologue

Within a tiny body dwelled a certain “thing.”
And so, for quite a long time, the people of this country were not aware of its existence.

That “thing” took on the form of a small girl.
And so nobody noticed it.
Under luxurious frills and lace, under layers upon layers upon layers as endless as your dreams—
Slept a peculiar kind of darkness.

A labyrinth.

That terrifying mind, capable of changing history upon walking its first step—
Within the little girl named Victorique, breathing a quiet sigh.

Victorique's mind was enormous and mystifying, an intricate labyrinth tinged in the color of night. Not only was no one able to understand it, no one was allowed to even catch a glimpse of it. Instead, she had always been like a lonely king, with neither subjects nor a domain, and yet possessing vast lands. Endowed with extensive knowledge and a "wellspring of wisdom," Victorique suffered from constant boredom. And so, secluding herself in a library tower that soared to the sky, she ceaselessly read books, and for quite a long time was visited by no one.

As a certain woman who knew her well once said, "To be bored must surely mean the same as being lonely...."

But—

Now at last, a single vassal had finally come to present himself.

This vassal was a small boy with black hair. Born in a faraway land, his skin an unfamiliar color, he bore a kind, and yet somehow stubborn countenance. His name was Kazuya Kujou, and he had come from a great distance, crossing the seas. And he climbed the library tower, until finally....

He met that girl.

The year was 1924.

In a corner of Europe, adjacent to the French, Swiss, and Italian borders, was Sauvure, a small country that nonetheless prided itself on its long history. If its Mediterranean coast, known as a summer resort for the nobility, was Sauvure's majestic entryway, then the heart of the Alps could be called its secret attic, slumbering within a grand castle. At the foot of the mountains stood St. Marguerite's School, a prestigious institution dedicated to educating the children of the aristocracy.

While the mysterious girl Victorique, also known as the Grey Wolf, was still secluded within the library tower of that school, the foreign student Kazuya Kujou had arrived from a certain country in the Orient.

And on a certain day in the springtime of that year, this girl and boy just so happened to meet....

one

chapter one — the traveler who comes in spring brings death to the school

[1]

Kazuya Kujou was a serious boy.

One could say that in itself was his strong suit, or at least not a handicap. He was serious and straight-laced, taciturn and prosaic, an altogether dour sort of man.

As the youngest child of four siblings, he had an expert in martial arts for an eldest brother, an accomplished amateur inventor as his second eldest brother, and a beautiful older sister who had graduated with a diploma in dance.

To compensate for having no special talents of his own, Kazuya was earnest to a fault, and always achieved top marks in school. For this reason—apart from the fact that as the third son, there would be no need for him to inherit the family headship, and therefore no problem in the unlikely event he were to encounter an early demise while abroad—his father decided to allow him to attend school in the kingdom of Sauvure, which had recently begun to accept foreign students from allied countries.

His father was a military man, and took every opportunity to lecture Kazuya on his duties as the third son of an imperial soldier. Accordingly, Kazuya made sure to remind himself constantly, so as to avoid making any mistakes, that the third son of an imperial soldier must behave with utmost seriousness....

“...Kujou! Kujou!”

It was slightly past seven in the morning.

By this time, Kazuya would normally already be awake in his room in the boys' dormitory, having washed his face, combed his hair, and changed into his uniform. Then he would make his way down the stairs to the dining room, the even sound of his footsteps echoing stiffly down the hall.

Since his aristocratic classmates were accustomed to sleeping in until the last minute before the morning lessons began, Kazuya targeted his arrival at the dining room to occur while it was still empty. The voluptuous, red-headed housemother, who appeared to be slightly past twenty years old, was usually the only one in the room. He would find her sitting on a stool with her legs crossed, engrossed in the morning newspaper while smoking her cigarettes. Since there were few boys willing to accept Kazuya, who was not only Asian but a commoner, he had still made no close friends. Therefore, he had been forced to adjust his schedule to this earlier hour in order to ward off his loneliness.

But today would be different.

Kazuya was in the middle of washing his face when a sudden loud knocking on his door and the sound of a woman's voice startled him. Already clad in his uniform, he opened the door.

Flaming red hair and a shapely figure came into view. The voluptuous housemother stood there with a drowsy expression on her face.

"...Good morning. Wh-what's the matter?" said Kazuya.

"Great! I knew you would be awake. You can go buy some ham and cheese for me!"

"...Huh?"

The housemother unceremoniously dragged Kazuya out of his room, and stuffed something shaped like a sandwich into his breast pocket. This only confused him more.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you doing? Ham and cheese? Me? Where? ... And why?"

"To be exact, what I need is five hundred grams of ricotta cheese, and one kilo of ham. You can find them at the morning market in the village. I forgot to buy them yesterday," answered the housemother in a rapid-fire prattle.

Kazuya shoved his necktie into his pocket. "Wh-why?"

"I had planned to go to the grocer's, but I ran into a friend along the way, and got invited to a dance party. I danced and had a few glasses of wine, then I came home, empty-handed.... There, I've told you, now go, quickly! Otherwise I'll have

no breakfast to serve anyone! I'll lose my job! Hurry along now!"

"Um, well, when I was asking 'why,' I meant 'why me'...."

"Because you always wake up early. Not to mention what a weak—haha, I mean well-mannered, yes, that's right, what a well-mannered young man you are!"

She dragged him downstairs and drove him outside with a merciless kick, the movement jostling her plump, womanly form.

"That sandwich will be your breakfast. I have to go slice some bread and boil some water now, so leave right away and make sure to hurry back!"

"Um, wait!"

The door slammed shut.

Kazuya stared, dumbfounded, at the closed door, still not quite fully awake. At last he heaved a sigh.

"...Very well."

He reluctantly set off toward the main gate.

Ever since he had been a boy living at home, Kazuya often experienced girls casually asking him for favors. He could remember his older sister telling him that it must mean he was very capable, but Kazuya never thought so. As an honorable soldier's son, he should have been spared the indignity of having to carry out the requests of others, much less being treated as a mere errand boy.

He slipped out of the main gate to walk along a gravel road that led to the village, and sighed.

For someone as reserved and inflexible as Kazuya Kujou was, and exceedingly timid when it came to women, he had an unexpected side of himself that he never showed to anyone. Although he took great pains to keep it a secret from family or friends, he was, in fact, a considerable romantic.

Hidden behind the stiff and serious mask he always wore, he harbored fantasies of an ideal encounter with a beautiful stranger of the opposite sex. He

privately believed that every boy was fated to meet his very own girl—a girl so perfectly compatible that it would be as if God had brought them together, someone who would be his kindred spirit, not to mention be very lovely....

...And if his father were to ever find out that he pondered such things, Kazuya would not only be severely embarrassed, but would be slapped across the face for his unmanly behavior. And if his brothers were to ever find out, they would surely laugh for three days straight. Consequently, he made absolutely sure that his family would never know his secret.

But the girl for me...

"Has to exist somewhere," he murmured. He increased his pace on the country road, and sighed once again.

Let's say, one morning... Yes, a morning like this....

Kazuya began to daydream.

Say I'm walking along like this, and I bump right into a cute girl who's headed my way. I would ask her, "Ça va?," and she would shyly respond, "Ça va bien, merci." The moment our eyes meet, she falls in love with me....

His thoughts having wandered thus far, Kazuya suddenly returned to his senses. Thinking over his uncharacteristically clichéd fantasy, he shrugged his shoulders and chuckled.

...Yeah, right. That never happens in real life. Anyway, after I buy that ham and cheese, I have to hurry back to school. In the half year I've been here, I've never been late once. The third son of an imperial soldier must never be late. So I better be quick....

Something moved in the corner of his vision, and he guessed that someone else must have passed nearby. Although it was unusual for anyone else to be walking on this deserted country road so early in the morning....

But ... as for that "girl of mine"....

Even as he quickened his footsteps, somehow Kazuya's thoughts again returned to the world of his daydreams.

If I could, I would want a blond girl. It's such a pretty color after all. A dazzling

hair color that doesn't exist in my own country....

Suddenly, he heard the squeal of brakes.

It was a peculiar sound. While Kazuya was solemnly ruminating on the issue of blondes, he inattentively turned the corner without looking. Not a second later, he heard the sound of a large object making an impact, followed by total silence. He snapped back to reality, blurting out a note of surprise.

A smoothly polished German motorbike had slammed into the low stone wall that divided the road from an adjacent vineyard. It appeared to have crashed at a high speed after not fully clearing the corner. Upon realizing that he had been only seconds away from being hit himself, Kazuya's face tightened.

A large man wearing a black helmet was still seated on the motorbike, seemingly frozen from the shock of the accident. Kazuya opened his mouth, about to give the rider a piece of his mind, but out of a concern to avoid agitating the man too much, thought better of it. Instead he asked, "Um, excuse me.... Are you all right?"

There was no answer. He peered into the helmet, and saw that the man's eyes were wide open, fixed and unblinking.

No matter how much I was wishing I could bump into some cute girl, instead I've just bumped into this big man on a motorbike, thought Kazuya. What dreadful luck! There can't be anything worse than this.

The second he finished his thought and exhaled another sigh...

Something worse happened.

An object tumbled to the ground.

It was the man's head.

Kazuya screamed.

The head, still wearing a helmet, rolled forward until reaching a stop squarely at Kazuya's feet, its frozen facial expression staring up at him. In uncomprehending shock, he faced the head and repeated, "Are you all right?!"

At that moment...

Kazuya heard a strange sound, like water streaming from a fountain. Looking upward, he saw blood spouting from the headless neck, staining the body and the motorbike in deep red.

He screamed again.

Beyond the spraying blood, he contemplated the radiance of the morning sun and the lush, green vineyard. It was still a fine day.

So I bumped into a headless corpse instead of a girl, he said to himself with knitted brows, his expression as solemn as ever.

...I never should've gone abroad.

Kazuya heaved a great sigh. And then...

He fainted.

two

[2]

The next time Kazuya regained consciousness, he found himself laid out on a bed in an unfamiliar room. It was small and dimly lit, and the walls were lined with bottles of medicine. He got up and looked out of the window. Recognizing the sight of the school's expansive campus, he deduced that he must be in the infirmary.

From the direction of the hallway, he heard an exclamation in a sweet soprano voice. "Inspector, wait! This is unjust!"

Upon hearing the familiar sound, Kazuya raised his head. The pitter-pat of footsteps quickly approached the room, and the owner of the voice opened the door.

A diminutive head peered into the room.

Drooping brown eyes behind large circular glasses. Shoulder-length brunette hair. These belonged to Kazuya's homeroom teacher Miss Cécile. She was presumably in her early twenties, but appeared even more childish than her students. The impression she gave was that of a small, round puppy.

As she entered the room, she smiled, noticing that Kazuya had woken up. "Kujou, you finally came to? That's a relief. How are you feeling?"

"Uh, I'm fine...."

"It's unusual for you to be late, so I was getting worried about you. I contacted the dormitory, but the housemother just mumbled something I couldn't quite make out...."

Kazuya recalled his mission to buy the ham and cheese, and wondered if the housemother had gotten angry, having to serve breakfast without any side dishes. As he gravely pondered this, he suddenly remembered the incident with the headless corpse, and blanched.

"And then we heard that this strange corpse was discovered on the road to the village, and you were lying unconscious next to it. So we had some men from the

village carry you back here. Kujou... What on earth happened?"

Kazuya was taken aback by the sight of his teacher's face clouded over with worry. He was just about to give her an explanation when he heard the door to the infirmary open with a loud rattle.

He looked over his shoulder at the door.

What he saw made him stiffen in shock.

Standing there was a very odd-looking man. He was young, tall and slender, with an aristocratic face as perfectly proportioned as that of an actor. He wore a well-tailored suit with burnished silver cufflinks, and looked every inch a dapper gentleman.

But there was one aspect of his appearance that was definitely off.

It was his hair.

His lustrous blond mane was, for some bizarre reason, swept forward and hardened into the shape of a drill. Kazuya stared at the golden drill, his mouth agape. The man looked back at him, and rested one hand on the wall and stretched one leg behind himself, arranging himself in the pose of a ballet dancer.

At last he spoke. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"...Huh?" This threw Kazuya off guard. *Have I been waiting? Who exactly have I been waiting for?* Next to him, he heard Miss Cécile inhale sharply. She seemed to be scowling at the man, who, for his part, merely ignored her.

"I'm Inspector Gréville de Blois."

"I see...."

"I'm here to interview you about the case."

"Very well," Kazuya said, nodding. *Oh, so it's just a policeman.*

Inspector de Blois snapped his fingers. Then Kazuya suddenly heard the sound of footsteps running down the hallways. Within moments, a pair of young men donning rabbit-skin hunting caps burst into the room. In contrast to the

inspector, their faces reflected an unassuming demeanor that hinted at their working-class origins. Their cotton waistcoats and sturdy boots were similar to those typically worn in the village. Kazuya surmised that the two of them must be the inspector's deputies.

But when they reached toward him, intending to drag him out of the infirmary, Kazuya noticed something strange.

For some reason, the two young deputies were holding hands very tightly.

Kazuya looked away, then after a moment looked back again.

...Yes, they were definitely holding hands.

Sensing the uneasy expression on Kazuya's face as he stared at them, the two men responded as if offering an excuse, "We're childhood friends, after all!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" they laughed in unison, their white teeth gleaming.

Kazuya, who had been growing more bewildered by the minute, found himself at a complete loss for words.

Inspector de Blois and his two unusual deputies ushered Kazuya into a room that was being used to store archives. The room possessed a gloomy, disquieting aura. Once inside, Kazuya spotted a faded brown globe, a huge Indian-style woodcarving of some scene he couldn't quite identify, and a collection of strange-looking medieval weapons strewn in a pile, as if the last person to see them had been unsure whether to throw them away or not.

A lamp burned with a faltering flame, emitting a continuous sputtering sound that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

After forcing Kazuya to sit down on an old and awfully creaky wooden chair, Inspector Blois rested his own backside on the edge of a sturdy rectangular desk. He picked up the globe and lazily spun it around. Suddenly, he began to rattle off Kazuya's particulars.

"Kazuya Kujou. Age: fifteen. Born in 1909. Grades: top-ranked. Friends: none."

At the mention of "friends: none," Kazuya hung his head dejectedly.

When he had been living in his home country, he had friends he could chat with at the military academy he attended, and friends among the boys he had grown up with in his neighborhood. But since coming to Sauvure, he could not fit in with the young aristocrats at school, no matter how hard he tried. The exclusionary atmosphere he was subjected to as an Asian foreigner caused him endless despair.

But the inspector paid no heed to Kazuya's anguish. Instead, he suddenly burst into laughter.

"What a shame. Dealing with juvenile delinquency is never an easy task. I take no pleasure in sending promising young men to the gallows, but the law is the law, my boy."

"...Huh?" The inspector's words jarred him back to reality. Kazuya was starting to get a very bad feeling about all of this. He glanced at the door, but the two hand-holding deputies were planted in front of it, blocking any chance of escape.

Don't tell me....

The inspector beamed a bright smile at Kazuya, in jarring contrast to his words. And then he inexplicably raised one leg, swung his body around in an awkward pose, and pointed a finger at Kazuya with a snap.

"Kujou, you are the killer!"

Flabbergasted, Kazuya began to frantically protest. "I am not! I was just a bystander. This is highly uncalled for. I object. I strongly object. And I demand that you make a proper deduction based on a rigorous investigation. I, I—"

"Tsk, ts, ts!"

Inspector de Blois winked at him and wagged his index finger. His attitude was starting to get on Kazuya's nerves. As Kazuya glared indignantly at the wagging finger, the inspector said something terrifying.

"I have no interest in your state of mind, Kujou—the mind of someone who goes abroad to commit murder, and spark an international incident!"

"A-an international incident?"

"The murdered man was a government worker on his holiday."

“Good God...”

Kazuya was speechless in shock, his face turning deathly pale.

The scenery of his homeland, his mother’s gentle smile, his father’s stern face, the sunlit view of the shoreline on the day that he left for Sauvure...

All of these memories flashed before his eyes like a kaleidoscope.

“...Kujou, I can’t see how the killer could be anyone but you.”

“Th-that’s absurd! How, how can you say such a thing...?”

“Bwa-ha-ha! If you really want to know...”

Inspector de Blois raised his leg in order to strike yet another pose. Before he could complete his move, someone knocked on the door.

But the inspector and his deputies pretended they didn’t hear it.

Again came the knocking at the door.

As the men continued to ignore the sound, someone forced the door open. Miss Cécile’s small, dainty face emerged from behind the two deputies. They attempted to block her way with their linked hands, but she merely smiled, and nimbly ducked underneath their outstretched arms. She walked up to Kazuya, who at that moment was about to burst into tears.

“Here you go!” she said, handing him two pieces of paper.

He took them without a second thought. They appeared to be class notes from this morning’s lessons. One paper had Kazuya’s name on it, and on the other one...

Another boy’s name was written there.

—“Victorique.”

Miss Cécile regarded Kazuya with a smile that seemed to brook no dissent. Kazuya returned her gaze questioningly.

“See, these are notes from this morning’s class. One set is yours. The other one belongs to another student who was also absent,” she said.

“I see....”

Kazuya realized that he had heard this name “Victorique” somewhere before. In the classroom next to the windows, there was a seat that was always empty. The entire half-year that he had been studying here, he had never once seen the individual who should have been sitting in that seat.

All he knew was that student’s name. “Victorique.”

Actually, Kazuya had been wondering why he never once came to class....

Miss Cécile smiled. “Kujou, go back in the classroom as soon as possible. But first I want you to take these notes to this student. Can you do that for me?”

Kazuya nodded. “All right.”

Inspector de Blois promptly flew into a rage. “Out of the way, woman! You’re obstructing the investigation!”

“If I could have a word with you, inspector.”

Miss Cécile planted both feet firmly on the floor, and turned to look at the inspector. Unnerved by her fearlessness, he shut his mouth.

“If you intend to treat him as a criminal, then please obtain an arrest warrant first. Otherwise, this is simply an abuse of your police powers, and I must protest against it, as a representative of this school!”

The inspector stared at her with narrowed eyes.

At last he slowly nodded. Then he said pompously, “Hmph. If that’s how it’s going to be, then I’ll apply for the warrant and receive it tomorrow. I shall pay you another visit at that time. I understand your desire to protect your beloved students, but take care not to forget the fact that history is littered with the many who lost their lives for the sake of heroism, my dear, gallant teacher...!”

Miss Cécile tugged Kazuya outside. He tumbled out of the gloomy room into the hallway. “Miss Cécile, um, thank you very—”

“Don’t mention it. Make sure you take this.” Miss Cécile pushed the notes into Kazuya’s hands, and began to walk down the hall. “You’re going to the library.”

“Th-the ... library?”

“Right.” Miss Cécile nodded.

Kazuya mulled this over. For some reason, this Victorique, who was a chronic truant and a failing student, spent lots of time in the library. But why would such a person be in that kind of place instead of coming to class?

In the back of Kazuya’s mind, he could recall the way his classmates kept their distance from that seat by the window, as if they were afraid of something.

But why? At any rate, the fact he had never seen this person’s face even once was unusual in itself.

Miss Cécile smiled cheerfully. “Go to the very top of the library. That child loves high places.”

“Is that right,” said Kazuya, his voice trailing off as he hung his head.

Now he felt slightly hurt. He had taken great pains to come to class every day, to prepare and revise his lessons, to frantically study French, which was the national language, and learn Latin for a deeper understanding of literature. In the process, he had risen to the top of his class. But he had never been praised for any of this. Seeing his teacher talk about this truant student with a smile on her face felt like a betrayal.

Only a few minutes ago the bizarre inspector had plunged him into the depths of terror, but now Kazuya felt himself sinking into an uncharacteristically sullen mood.

“There’s a saying in my homeland, that smoke and a certain you-know-what like high places.”*

“Oh, Kujou, don’t say that,” Miss Cécile said, showing no sign of taking offense. Instead, she merely gave a queer chuckle.

And then she said, almost dreamily, “Actually, that child is a genius, you know....”

**“Smoke and fools like high places” is a Japanese proverb that is used to refer to the dangers of people getting too carried away with thinking too highly of themselves.*

three

[3]

What could possibly cause a teacher to ignore a talented, elite student, who had come all the way from the Far East, in favor of praising a perpetual truant as a genius?

Kazuya pondered this as he walked along the campus road.

The sulky expression on his face notwithstanding, his conscientious nature compelled him to carry out his task of delivering the notes to the library. He walked through school grounds which were lavishly arrayed in the form of a French garden. A lush, inviting lawn spread out in between fountains, flower beds, and streams that were placed here and there. Kazuya trudged down a path lined with white gravel that ran beside the lawn.

He arrived at a substantially built structure that was hidden behind the main campus buildings.

This was St. Marguerite's Library.

Huge bookshelves lined every wall in a square, hollow building. Looking up from the central atrium, he saw a sublime piece of religious art painted on the ceiling far above. Below it was a narrow wooden staircase that twined itself from bookshelf to bookshelf, twisting precariously upward like an enormous labyrinth.

According to legend, the early seventeenth century king who founded the school deliberately constructed this library in the form of a maze in order to hide a room at the very top that he used to rendezvous with his lover.

But now this library was shrouded in silence. The tangible scent of dust, mildew, and knowledge hung in the air.

Kazuya lifted his gaze, overcome by a feeling of reverence. And then...

Near the ceiling, he saw something that resembled a golden belt dangling in the air.

...What could that be?

For a moment, he cocked his head in puzzlement. Then he began to ascend the labyrinthine stairs.

They stretched from wall to wall. Taking careful steps, he slowly ascended closer and closer to the ceiling. It was like walking a tightrope. He trembled as he climbed the narrow stairs, taking care not to look down.

Growing more exhausted by the minute, he grumbled to himself indignantly, *Why do I have to come all the way over here for the sake of some truant failure of a student....* But before he knew it, he found the dangling golden belt right before his eyes.

He saw a thin white column of smoke drift to the ceiling.

Kazuya hesitantly took the final step.

And found himself in a garden.

Surprisingly enough, the very top of the library was in fact a conservatory thick with vegetation. A soothing glow emanated from skylights, illuminating the plants as they swayed in a gentle breeze. Contrary to the legend of the king's secret rendezvous, here there was merely a sunlit, and empty, room.

Someone had placed a large porcelain doll on the landing of the stairs to the conservatory, as if abandoning it there.

It was a marvelous doll, close to life-sized at around one hundred and forty centimeters. It wore a black dress with plush velvet frills billowing out from waist to hem in countless layers, like a small, unearthly flower blooming at dusk. From underneath a white headdress, embroidered with roses and lace ribbons, flowed long, splendid blond hair, spilling down to the floor as if it were a velvet turban come undone.

The profile of her face revealed a cold sort of beauty, ambiguous in whether it belonged to an adult or a child.

This exquisite doll strewn on the landing of the stairs was coolly, languidly, smoking a pipe.

...A doll smoking a pipe?!

Suddenly, the doll ... no, the girl, slowly opened her mouth. “So, it wasn’t enough that you were late to class, but on top of that, you’ve decided to come play truant in the library? Of course, you may do as you wish, but at least go somewhere else so that you aren’t in my way.”

She closed her mouth just as slowly.

Kazuya gasped, startled at the unexpected sound of a husky voice, akin to that of an old woman. There was an astonishing disparity between her appearance and her voice. Her delicate body, which was enveloped in frills and lace as gorgeous as anyone could dream of, was so tiny that one couldn’t imagine that it had been born into this world more than a few years ago. But her voice sounded as mature as someone who had already lived for decades....

The girl paid no heed to Kazuya, who stood staring dazedly at her cold and beautiful form, so perfect that she could easily be mistaken for a doll. She returned to silently smoking her pipe, saying nothing more.

At last, Kazuya recovered his composure. “Huh? ... Might you be Victorique, by any chance?”

There was no answer. He continued hesitantly, “If you are, then, I’m supposed to give these these notes to you....”

The girl—Victorique—wordlessly extended her hand.

Kazuya took a few steps forward, and held out the stack of notes to her. In the still atmosphere, his footsteps sounded startlingly loud, causing him to wince instinctively. Feeling like a oafish intruder into a tranquil paradise, he blushed despite himself.

And he quietly observed her.

...So that delinquent turned out to be a girl. And an incredible beauty at that. I even thought she was a doll at first. But she somehow seems like ... no, she definitely is ... a very strange kid.

Still puffing away on her pipe, she stretched out her unoccupied hand to receive the notes. Then this peculiar girl abruptly parted her small, cherry-red lips. “By the way, who the devil are you?”

“Huh?” Kazuya shrank back, then blushed again without knowing why. “I’m ... Kujou. I’m in the same class as you. Although we’ve never met before.”

“So you’re an Oriental.”

At this, the girl inexplicably smirked. The sudden transformation of her chilly facial expression seemed positively maniacal. The effect made Kazuya shudder.

She gleefully continued in a husky murmur. “I see. I suppose this makes you the ‘reaper who comes in spring,’ then.”

“...Huh?” Kazuya stumbled at the unfamiliar phrase.

The girl grinned. “Oh, you didn’t know? It’s something to do with this decrepit, superstitious school. One of its many inane ghost stories. ‘The traveler who comes in spring brings death to the school.’ Don’t ask me why, but the students here love their ghost stories. And you make eminently suitable material for one. At any rate, the end result is that everyone is afraid of you and no one would dare approach you.”

“Wh-what...?”

Kazuya stood rooted to the ground, momentarily dumbstruck.

He felt the sensation of a gaping hole forming in his heart.

In his mind’s eye, he could visualize himself sitting in the classroom alone, the young aristocrats keeping their distance from him as they whispered amongst themselves. He thought of the way the boy sitting in the seat next to him always found an excuse to leave whenever Kazuya tried to talk to him, as if he were trying to escape... These scenes and more flashed through his mind.

For the past half year, no matter how much he agonized over the fact that he couldn’t make any friends, he never could have imagined that the cause would be some superstition like this.

Kazuya felt his mood souring. “But, but that makes no sense. I mean, it was months ago that I came here. It was in autumn. See, how do you explain that?”

The girl’s profile warped into a sneer. “Hmm, is that so?”

“Yes!”

“Well, as far as they’re concerned, it doesn’t matter either way. After all, a black-haired Oriental of few words is an ideal fit for the image of the Grim Reaper.”

Kazuya froze in shock. But the girl didn’t bother to make the slightest glance in his direction. Her face revealed nothing more than her usual coldness.

For a minute, he glared at her. Her expression was dispassionate and unyielding, on the verge of defiance, the sort of face he had grown thoroughly sick of in the months since he had come to Sauvure. In her countenance, he recognized the haughty attitude peculiar to the aristocracy.

Kazuya suddenly felt a combination of unease and resentment. His negative feelings against the upper-class society that he had worked so hard to fit into began to bubble up and seethe in his chest.

He turned back toward the labyrinthine staircase.

His feet had already descended a few steps when something occurred to him.

Kazuya stopped and looked back at the girl, then addressed her in a low voice. “Say ... um, Victorique.”

“...What do you want?” she responded, as if it were hugely bothersome for her to do so.

Undeterred, Kazuya asked, “How did you know I was late for class?”

The girl sneered. “Hmph. It’s very simple. An overflowing wellspring of wisdom told it to me.”

“And what does that mean...?”

“It happened something like this,” Victorique said, raising her husky voice triumphantly. “Kujou, I have determined that you are a methodical, damnably earnest, bore of a man.”

“H-hey!”

“And yet, what has happened to your necktie? It ought to be neatly in place around your neck, but one can see that it has been shoved into your pocket instead. For this reason, I have deduced that you likely had to leave your dormitory in a rush.”

Kazuya instinctively touched his hand to his neck. True to her words, the tie that should have been neatly in place was missing. Instead, it was stuffed into his pocket, still untied.

“And then, there’s that smell,” Victorique continued.

“Huh? What smell?”

“Yes, the savory smell of bread. Why would you be carrying bread around with you when lunch is still hours away? In other words, if we look in your other pocket...”

Kazuya put his hand into the pocket that did not contain the necktie, and pulled out the sandwich that the housemother had shoved inside when he left the dormitory. It had been mostly squashed, but still smelled good.

“The breakfast you should have already eaten is still in your pocket. From this, we can tell that you were running late. That is all. Do you understand now?”

Seemingly tired of talking, Victorique stretched, and opened her mouth widely in a weary yawn. Her small body elongated to a surprising span, the movement reminiscent of a stretching kitten. The slightest trace of teardrops collected in the corners of her eyes. Following this, she began to lazily smoke her pipe once more.

Then she noticed Kazuya staring at her curiously, much the way one would stare at some unidentifiable object. She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. “Hey! This is quite bothersome ... but I shall explain it to you in greater detail.”

“Yes, please...”

“I am honing my senses.”

“...I’m sorry?”

“And so, using this ‘wellspring of wisdom’ of mine, I take fragments that I have collected from the chaos of the world and amuse myself with them to pass the time.”

“Chaos...? Fragments? Wellspring of wisdom?”

“Correct. Would it be easier for you to understand if I were to say that I reconstruct them?”

“...Reconstruct?”

“Occasionally, when I’m in the mood, I may even articulate the process so that a mediocre person like you may also understand.”

“....”

“Oh, how bothersome it is to explain such things. Well ... do you understand now?”

Still completely bewildered, Kazuya couldn’t think of anything to say in response.

But he did feel a little put out.

What’s with this attitude of hers. And I don’t quite understand what she’s talking about.... Well, at least it’s true that her deduction was correct. As much as I’m reluctant to admit it, this “wellspring of wisdom” or whatever it is seems to be pretty effective. But still, why does she have to be so...

Kazuya was growing steadily more exasperated. Victorique’s aloof, disdainful manner was on the verge of becoming completely unbearable, especially coming from a failing student who wouldn’t even bother to come to class.

Thoroughly irritated, Kazuya began his rebuttal. “But what about you? Aren’t you late for class and here to play truant, too? And you dare make fun of me for that? That’s completely unfair!”

“Hmph.” Victorique snickered scornfully. “I’m not like you.”

“And how are you different?”

“I’m not late. I’ve been here all day.”

Kazuya frowned. “What does that mean? What on earth have you been doing here all by yourself?”

“I’m meditating.”

Kazuya took one step up the stairs.

Only now did he notice the curious sight surrounding Victorique as she sat flat on the ground of the conservatory.

Countless open books were placed on the floor, radiating around her in all

directions. Books in Latin, books of advanced mathematics, classical literature, biology... Any one of them on its own would have been fearsomely difficult to decipher. Kazuya gasped.

This girl... Don't tell me she's reading all of those simultaneously? Now that I think of it, during this whole time that she's been smoking her pipe and talking to me, I saw her stretch out her hand from time to time. That must've been her turning the pages. And as she was reading, at the same time she was still able to make deductions based on my behavior!

Kazuya felt a sudden chill race down his spine as Miss Cécile's mellifluous voice replayed in his head. *Actually, that child is a genius, you know....*

For a moment, he gazed at her in awe. She continued skimming through the esoteric-looking books, a remarkably listless and disinterested expression on her face.

Without quite understanding why, Kazuya was beginning to feel increasingly combative toward this strange, brilliant girl and her surly disdain. He decided that he would try to throw her off guard.

"But I'm sure you could never guess the reason I was late, could you?"

There was a beat of silence.

Then, for the first time, Victorique lifted her head to face him directly.

And Kazuya felt his heart skip a beat.

Large, shining-green eyes gazed at him. Like some mystical jewel, they sparkled with an otherworldly glow, bathing her corner of the empty garden with shimmering light. Their contrast with her long, vibrantly lustrous blond hair pierced him through his chest.

And that indescribable visage filled with a profound sadness, as if she were an old woman who had lived for far too long...

She's lovely...!

Unexpectedly, Kazuya felt his heart shaken to its core. For reasons that were unclear even to himself, he found the sensation infuriating.

Struggling to regain his senses, he took a deep breath. "Actually, it's because

of a murder case.”

He heard a soft plopping sound.

The pipe fell from Victorique’s mouth.

It had fallen on top of her sumptuously frilly dress. Kazuya hastily retrieved it, brushing off her lap with his other hand, checking to make sure no ash had spilled out. Victorique parted her thin lips, jutting them out as if asking him to place the pipe in its original position. He gently inserted the pipe back inside. In reaction to Kazuya’s instinctive gesture of gentlemanly assistance, she paused, frowning at him suspiciously.

Finally, she removed the pipe from her mouth and said, “Huh!”

Kazuya grimaced. Without realizing it, he had calmed down enough to sit on the floor next to her. “And that’s all you have to say?!” he grumbled.

“...Would you rather I say something like, ‘no less from the Grim Reaper’?”

For a moment, Kazuya felt abashed. Then he collected himself, and said, “Now you listen here! You ought to know that I was in serious trouble this morning. I was a witness to a murder case, and treated like a criminal by some police inspector with a weird hairstyle!”

“Mmm? An inspector with a weird hairstyle?” An odd expression crossed Victorique’s face, but by that time Kazuya was too agitated to notice.

“...What if I end up actually getting convicted as a murderer. I don’t want to be hanged to death in a foreign land. Or what if I get deported back to my home country? ... Oh, why did this have to happen, when I’ve done nothing but study as diligently as possible these past few months.... This is just terrible!”

“...A police inspector with a weird hairstyle, you said?”

Puzzled, Kazuya looked up at her and nodded. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

Victorique’s lips curled in a fiendish smile. As she smirked, she took a vigorous puff on her pipe, then exhaled audibly.

A line of white smoke floated toward the ceiling.

In a split-second, her entire demeanor changed as if something had suddenly

piqued her interest, and she turned around to face Kazuya. “Tell me what happened. I will reconstruct the chaos for you.”

“Huh?”

Victorique snapped back impatiently, “I am telling you that I am going to use my wellspring of wisdom to help you.”

“...Why?” Baffled by the sudden smirk that appeared on Victorique’s face, he gave the tiny, beautiful girl a skeptical glance.

Victorique replied in a clear and distinct voice, with no trace of hesitation. “To relieve my boredom, of course.”

Victorique dragged a summary of the day’s events out of Kazuya, despite his reluctance to tell her. His agitation from earlier had evaporated from his body, and now he was left hanging his head in utter dejection. It was all thanks to what Victorique had said.

“Tell me not only what you saw, but also what you were thinking at the time. Describe everything in detail, down to the hole in your ass.”

“N-no way. I can’t tell you *everything* I was thinking. A gentleman should be allowed a few playful secrets....”

“If you’re a gentleman, then I’m a goddess. Enough with your pointless, idiotic excuses. Now, speak!”

Startled by Victorique’s sharp tongue, Kazuya’s mind froze, and he was unable to resist her. He had never been spoken to by a woman in such a intimidating way. In the country where he had grown up, he was used to women being much more reserved and obedient creatures.

And thus he found himself giving her every intimate detail about his daydream that he had sworn to never reveal to anyone, about an “ideal encounter” with “his very own girl.” Naturally, this was the first time in his fifteen years of existence that he had ever told anyone about this kind of fantasy. As he spoke, he sank further and further down into the deepest depths of shame. To borrow an expression that his father would often use, it felt as if the [ball containing his](#)

[soul](#) had been stolen. He clasped his arms around his knees and bowed his head.

“...So that’s how it is. I get the idea now.” Victorique smoked her pipe and nodded as if thoroughly satisfied. She showed no indication of acknowledging Kazuya’s despair.

And then she uttered something particularly cruel.

“What that inspector with the weird hairstyle said makes plenty of sense now.”

Kazuya recovered his senses with a jolt. He thought he could feel a little bit of his soul reenter his body. “How can you say such a thing?! I absolutely did not—”

“Shut up.”

“...Okay.”

“Think about it. First of all, it’s impossible to jump on a motorbike while it’s in motion and cut someone’s head off. It would have likewise been impossible for someone to have quickly jumped off the bike after committing the crime. That’s because, when you encountered the bike right after it had crashed into the wall, there was no one else but you at the scene of the crime.”

Kazuya nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. It’s true that nobody else was there.”

“So, when could the crime have been committed?”

“Well...”

“Probably after the bike had come to a stop. And the only one there was you, Kujou. Which means...”

Kazuya was starting to get a bad feeling about this. It reminded him of how he felt in that gloomy room with the globe and the medieval weapons when Inspector de Blois had suddenly pointed his finger at him.

And now suddenly, just as the inspector had done, Victorique pointed her pipe at Kazuya, and said, “You are the killer!”

Kazuya, now on the verge of tears, could not manage a response.

With a hint of a devilish smile on her lips, Victorique gave him a cool stare. “...And wouldn’t *that* be amusing!”

“Are you making fun of me?!” Kazuya jumped up to his feet in rage.

Victorique's face abruptly turned solemn. She looked up at him and said in her husky voice, "But you know, when the inspector was suspecting you of being the killer, he was probably basing his inference on the same thought process. In other words, unless we find the real killer and clear you of suspicion, you will most likely be deported, and in the worst case scenario, this country will put you to death by hanging. How dreadful for you!"

Kazuya's face drained of all color. He sat down heavily and clutched his head. Scenes from his hometown, first of his parents, then the faces of his family and friends that he had left behind, once again began to whirl through his mind.

Victorique gave him a sidelong glance. Then she turned back to her books, flipping the pages as if nothing had happened.

After a few moments, she yawned. "Well, at least I know the truth," she muttered under her breath, then took another drag on her pipe.

From the skylights, rays of warm springtime sunshine illuminated the conservatory. A gentle breeze occasionally wafted through the air, ruffling the leaves of the palm trees, large red flowers, and Victorique's blond hair.

Several seconds elapsed.

Then Kazuya slowly raised his head. "...Did you just say that you knew the truth?"

Victorique said nothing. Kazuya peered into her face, but she was busily immersing herself into her books as if she had forgotten he was there. She turned the pages with remarkable speed.

"Hey."

"...Mmm?"

Victorique looked up at him, seemingly returning from her reverie. She nodded listlessly. "Oh, of course I know. The words 'I don't know' aren't written in my dictionary. I know everything.... What about it?"

Kazuya stamped his feet in impatience. "'What about it?' ... Then tell me!"

"Hmm?" A look of bafflement crossed Victorique's face. In a deeply mystified tone, she asked, "Why?"

—And then, for countless minutes afterward, Kazuya attempted to persuade Victorique, mustering up every argument he could possibly think of, shedding tears of anger all the while.

In the meantime, Victorique continued to avidly read her books, coolly pretending not to listen. At last, when he had succeeded in beating down her resistance, she lifted her head to him. “By the way.”

“Yes, yes!”

“I consider tedium to be my greatest enemy.”

“...Okay?” Kazuya didn’t quite catch her meaning.

Victorique continued in an oddly exultant tone. “It’s the same when it comes to food. Rather than eat something banal, I think it’s better to go hungry. Isn’t this the very point of possessing intelligence?”

“Right...”

Growing impatient with Kazuya’s lack of understanding, Victorique swiftly pushed her face close to his. “Tomorrow you will bring me some food from the country of your birth.”

“Why? Will that help you think?”

“Of course not. It’s just food.” Victorique snorted. “So, this is how it’s going to work. If the food you bring is unusual, tasty, and suits my fancy, then perhaps I might feel like rescuing you.”

“What?!” Kazuya cried out in dismay. “Don’t you... Don’t you have any sense of compassion?!” he asked falteringly.

“Compassion?” Victorique repeated mockingly. “Oh, that. That sort of thing is where intelligence goes to die.”

Laughing scornfully, she shooed Kazuya away with a wave of her tiny hand.

Kazuya stumbled out of the library in a state of utter shock. A leather-covered door arrayed with round metal tacks closed behind him with a heavy thud.

As he stood on the lawn in a daze, two men wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps

approached, skipping in tandem, from beyond the campus road. They were the deputies of the inspector Gréville de Blois, and they were holding hands despite both being men. The two of them passed in front of Kazuya, then nimbly skipped back to him as if he had caught their attention.

“Oh, it’s Kujou! Are you perhaps not feeling well?”

“No, I’m not feeling well,” answered Kazuya flatly. The two deputies looked at each other, then for some reason burst into laughter.

“Um... Am I really going to be arrested?”

“Yeah, probably tomorrow!” they said, cheerfully and without any hesitation.

Kazuya held his head in his hands.

“I mean, there weren’t any suspicious people there except you, Kujou!”

“Besides, we could never disobey Inspector de Blois!”

“...What do you mean by that?”

The two men exchanged a look. “Yeah... Well, the truth is, he never actually attended the police academy. He’s just the son of some aristocrat. For some reason, he wanted to work for the police, so he was granted a position in the village police station.”

“That’s why we’re here to keep an eye on him. But sometimes he can get a bit carried away with himself.”

“The whims of the nobility can sure put you in a right pickle!”

Seeing Kazuya’s look of surprise, they added, “But you know what, that inspector, sometimes he spots the culprit straightaway. He may say some strange things at first, but then the next day, he’s so sharp, he’s practically a different person!”

“I know! It’s almost like he’s some kind of genius!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Laughing gaily, the two men took their leave, skipping all the way. Kazuya watched them depart, his mouth hanging open in shock. Then, feeling the weight of the dire situation he found himself in, he sighed heavily.

Oh, I've had enough. You aristocrats and you geniuses can all just go to hell...!

Now in a bitterly foul mood, he started to walk again. The sky was darkening, and a cold wind began to chill his skin. The road back to the dormitory was utterly quiet, making Kazuya feel as if he were the only person left in the school.

Once he returned to his room, he would have to ransack the packages his family had sent from home, and find some food that would suit the fancy of that eccentric young lady...

four

[4]

The very next day, the sky was shrouded in ominous grey clouds, making yesterday's fine weather feel like a distant memory.

At slightly past seven in the morning, someone knocked on the door of Kazuya's room in the boys' dormitory. He had just finished washing his face and combing his hair, and was in the middle of fastening his tie when he opened the door. There he saw the worried face of the housemother, her red hair shaking to and fro.

"Kujou! I heard something terrible happened to you yesterday. I'm sorry! It's all my fault for asking that weird favor of you...."

"Not at all. I'd rather ask, were you able to manage with yesterday's breakfast?"

"...I got yelled at." She hung her head.

Before she answered, Kazuya held out a bag filled with unfamiliar-looking tiny pink, orange, and yellow pellets for her inspection. The housemother took a sniff.

"...What's that?"

"It's candy, but what do you think of it?"

"I guess ... it looks tasty?"

"Good. I'll go with this, then," Kazuya said, nodding as if relieved over something.

Before closing the door, the housemother peered inside curiously. The normally spotlessly tidy room of an honors student was now cluttered with suitcases that had been dragged out and piled into a heap.

Kujou, what on earth have you been doing...?

She walked away, shaking her head.

Kazuya walked to class, still cradling the bag of candy. Since last night, he had searched every nook and cranny of the luggage he had brought from his home, until finally locating some sweets that looked like something a girl would like, at least in his opinion. Under the cloudy sky, he approached the stately, U-shaped main building. As soon as he entered his classroom, the young aristocrats shied away from him the way they always did. Their eyes darted nervously in his direction, but avoided direct eye contact.

Kazuya ignored them, and searched for the empty seat by the window. Once again, there was no one in Victorique's seat, and no indication that its intended occupant would be coming to class today.

I knew she wouldn't be in the classroom.... I guess I have no choice but to go to the library during the lunch break, he said to himself with a nod. But at that very moment...

From the hallway, the voices of two quarreling adults, a man and a woman, grew steadily louder.

"This is unjust!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Today I brought the arrest warrant, just as you asked! A foreign student committing a political killing! That certainly sounds like a recipe for an international incident!"

Kazuya jumped up in alarm. Apparently, Inspector de Blois had arrived sooner than he thought, and this time he came armed with an arrest warrant.

He opened a classroom window, clutching the bag of candy in one hand. Tuning out the clamorous shouts of his classmates, he closed his eyes and jumped from the second story. For someone as serious and strait-laced as Kazuya, it was naturally the first time in his life that he had ever left a classroom through an exit other than the door.

Trembling inwardly, he landed in a somersault atop the lawn in the courtyard.

Ouch!

Adding insult to the injury of his mental turmoil, among the uproar of voices emanating from the classroom overhead he heard overlapping shouts of, "Look!" "The Grim Reaper escaped!"

Kazuya glared at the window indignantly. ...*Damn it. So they really have been calling me "The Grim Reaper" behind my back!*

Kazuya rushed headlong into the library, then frantically ran up the maze-like stairs.

He shakily ascended the staircase, rising higher and higher toward the solemn religious fresco that looked down on him from the distant ceiling. And today, just as before, he spotted something like a golden belt hanging down from between segments of railing. From time to time it swayed invitingly, rustled by a stealthy breeze.

"...Victorique!"

When he had at last reached the conservatory, Kazuya found Victorique sitting in exactly the same position as yesterday, surrounded by plants, listlessly skimming through opened books that lay radiating about her in all directions. He approached her, panting wearily.

Victorique lifted her face from her books, and murmured in a voice filled with boredom, "Oh, you again." She languorously took a puff from her pipe. "It must be very lonely having no friends, Kujou."

The sudden insult made Kazuya flinch. "This isn't the time for one of your jokes," he said, taking a seat. "Never mind that. Come on, don't forget what we agreed upon yesterday!"

"...And what was that?"

"You said you would solve the case for me! You were going to tell me the whole story behind the murder!"

Victorique looked up at Kazuya, staring at him blankly. Finally, she gave a grunt, and nodded as if remembering something.

And she promptly held out her tiny hand.

Kazuya sighed, and deposited the bag of candy into her palm. She opened the bag with a surprising degree of eagerness.

"...Munch, munch. What is this?"

“It’s called [*hina-arare*](#).”

“It has an unusual flavor. Munch, munch...”

“....”

She continued chewing.

“....”

Then chewed some more.

“...Um, sorry to interrupt, but...”

In the manner of a small animal cutely chomping on its food, Victorique gnawed away at the exotic sweets. Seemingly enchanted by the unusual taste and shape, she grabbed the candies with her tiny hand and rapturously shoved them into her mouth, chewing with gusto.

His nerves on a razor’s edge, Kazuya waited for Victorique to acknowledge his presence again. He was becoming more anxious by the second.

I put all of my hopes on this girl.... But if I really think about it, I know nothing about who she is, or whether she really knows how to solve the case. If it turns out that she made everything up just to get me to bring her some sweets, I don’t know what I’ll do. And there’s already an arrest warrant out for me...

The footsteps of someone walking into the atrium echoed from far below. Kazuya peeked over the railing, and upon seeing a golden-tipped head pointing back at him, quickly jumped back. He heard Inspector de Blois run to the interior of the hall where there was a hydraulic elevator reserved for staff use.

The iron cage emitted a coarse groan, beginning its slow ascent.

Nearly in tears, Kazuya blurted out loudly, “It’ll become an international incident!”

Victorique’s hand, which had been reaching for more candy, stopped in midair. She looked up at Kazuya.

In a trembling voice, he cried out, “My dad is going to kill me! No, more like I’ll be hanged to death instead! Yes, I’m going to die on foreign soil! Although I’d really rather not!”

Victorique's mouth dropped open, and she stared at Kazuya in amazement for what felt like a very long time.

Then, with an impish smile on her face, she muttered, "...The Grim Reaper is crying."

Kazuya turned to look at her. "S-stop that!"

"...It was a joke."

"A joke?! Someone's life is hanging in the balance, and you're making a joke?! You ought to know that there are things you should and shouldn't say— Why are you smiling?! Cut that out! Seriously..."

The more Kazuya earnestly protested, the more the gleeful smile on Victorique's face widened. "Now, now, just calm down," she said, sounding positively jubilant.

"Calm down? You think I can calm down in a situation like this? What good will that do me? I ought to start running instead. I feel like running as far as I can, and screaming all the way. Ugh! Ugh!" Each time he moaned, his face grew redder and redder.

The iron cage creaked as it climbed slowly to the top.

Victorique stopped smiling. With a touch of disgust, she said, "Shut up. You are leaving me no choice. I'll explain things to you now."

"Hurry, hurry!" Kazuya stamped his foot.

Victorique took a leisurely puff from her pipe. "Now listen carefully. If you want to cut the head off a person riding a motorbike, there is no need to get on the bike, or to even go near it."

"Why? Ugh!"

"Because it's enough for the person on the bike himself to be traveling at a high rate of speed."

"Ugh! Ugh! ... Wait, what do you mean?"

Composure returned to Kazuya's face. He recovered the poise he normally possessed as an accomplished student, and immediately sat down, maintaining

ramrod straight posture as he concentrated on Victorique's explanation.

She stretched her thin arms out in either direction. "Just think: what would happen if you took a wire or something like that, and hung it out across the path of a motorbike? This is on a road where your target is sure to pass through, and at a time when there won't be anyone else around. The bike would speed up through this area, and the wire would cut the rider's head off. The killer could then untie the wire and escape."

Feeling disoriented, Kazuya stared at Victorique. He wiped the sweat from his brow, and took a deep breath. "I, I see...."

"Uh-huh."

"But still, Victorique, um, as far as any proof goes..."

Victorique calmly took a drag from her pipe. "Most likely, when you walked by at that time of morning when it would usually be deserted, the killer had no choice but to flee upon hearing your scream.... Well, I won't say it's completely impossible, you know. There's still a chance that he could have left without retrieving—"

The iron cage screeched, just inches from the top. There was a moment of ominous silence, then a loud clunk as it locked into place.

The iron gate opened.

Beyond the lush greenery, the inspector with the hairstyle molded into a strange shape stood inside, striking a pose.

When he caught sight of Victorique face to face with Kazuya in the conservatory, his eyes opened wide in shock.

Oh? Kazuya noticed the change in the inspector's expression. *Do these two know each other?* He looked over at Victorique. She pretended not to see the inspector, instead firmly shifting her gaze to her books as if she wanted to bury her face in them. *Well, that's interesting...*

The inspector, seeming to finally collect his wits, turned to Kazuya. In his hand he gripped a bloodstained spool of wire, and he held it up in Kazuya's direction, raised one leg, and shouted, "Ha, ha, ha! Here's your proof!"

His shout reverberated in the quiet garden.

“This was found near the crime scene! It was tied between some nearby trees. Hmm... I’m not quite sure how, but this must be your doing! You’re under arrest, you international murderer, you!”

Kazuya couldn’t help smiling assuredly in response, and he turned to Victorique, saying, “Go ahead, Victorique. Tell the inspector what you figured out.”

She did not respond.

He found her busily chewing the *hina-arare*, her mouth crammed shut. She looked at him, then shrugged her shoulders as if to say she didn’t feel like talking, and resumed her reading.

“Um... Victorique?”

Inspector de Blois started to walk toward Kazuya slowly.

Trembling, Kazuya cried out, “It wasn’t me! Listen, inspector!”

Kazuya was forced to argue for his own innocence. But in the middle of his explanation to the inspector, Victorique suddenly began to scrutinize the bloodstained wire from every angle, as if she had regained interest in the proceedings.

The inspector appeared to have tentatively accepted his explanation of how the wire had been used, although it still took quite a bit of time before he agreed to release Kazuya as a suspect. Once the inspector finally relented, Kazuya slumped down to the floor in exhaustion.

Victorique spared him not a moment’s glance. “Gréville,” she said, raising her head abruptly.

The inspector’s cheek twitched. “Wh-what do you want?”

Kazuya observed him carefully, noting his change in expression.

Inspector de Blois’ face had inexplicably stiffened, his expression resembling that of a frightened child. He seemed to be unusually petrified of Victorique—

tiny Victorique, engulfed in frills—as if she held some kind of overwhelming power.

In that instant, Kazuya perceived the roles of adult and child switching places, accompanied by an almost palpable ringing sound. It was a startling sight.

The inspector opened his quivering lips. “I, I don’t n-need your help anymore!”

Victorique smiled scornfully. “As you wish.”

“Um, I guess you two know each other?” Kazuya said.

There was no reply from either quarter. Deflated, he said nothing more.

Inspector de Blois squared his shoulders and stepped back into the metal cage of the elevator. The iron-latticed gate closed behind him.

A breeze blew in from the skylights, rustling the fronds of the palm trees.

Victorique’s soft voice broke the stillness. “The real killer is a blond girl. Her fingers are wounded.”

The inspector turned around, a look of surprise on his face. “H-how...?”

“Check the surgical hospitals, Gréville.”

The iron cage dropped below the floor with a clang, and inspector’s dumbfounded face disappeared with the rest of him.

Once the inspector had left the scene, Victorique began to lethargically smoke her pipe once more, seeming to have lost all interest in the world around her. She returned to slowly flipping the pages of her books as if nothing had happened.

Kazuya, finally recovering from his bewilderment, called out to her. “Hey, Victorique.”

“...”

“I said, hey. What happened just now?”

Victorique raised her head reluctantly. “...Hmm? Oh, that was the result of my meditation. My overflowing wellspring of wisdom has informed me so.”

She lapsed into silence.

Then, defeated by Kazuya's persistent gaze, she looked up at him and said peevishly, "Think about it, Kujou. Why would the culprit choose such an elaborate method of killing? There are any number of easier and quicker ways to do it: stabbing, bludgeoning, shooting..."

"W-well, yes..."

"It's because she was afraid of the victim," Victorique continued, taking another piece of candy. "The killer is a woman, or possibly a child. And the victim was an adult man. The killer was afraid of confronting him directly on her own, so she chose this method of killing him remotely. So it gives me the impression of someone physically much weaker."

"Then what about the wounds on her fingers?"

"When I inspected the wire, I saw that not only was there blood on the section that cut off the victim's head, but also small bloodstains on the ends. That was the perpetrator's blood. It's probable that the killer inadvertently sliced her fingers when she was setting up and removing the wire."

From his seated position, Kazuya casually reached out to take some *hina-arare* for himself. It was ages since he'd last eaten this type of candy, and he savored the familiar flavor.

Then he asked in an even more inquisitive tone, "But how did you get that it was a blond girl?"

"That was from that embarrassing daydream of yours, Kujou."

Kazuya jumped up with a screech, accidentally swallowing the piece of candy.

But Victorique showed no interest in his agitation. In a voice unchanged in its diffidence, she replied, "You know, humans are creatures who react in response to visual stimuli. Something that happens to enter their field of vision may become the first step of a chain reaction that results in a daydream about a related topic. You understand that, don't you?"

"I, I suppose...?"

"Now, Kujou. Why would you, in the midst of hurrying to carry out the task

that the housemother bestowed upon you, enter this unseemly state of lust, and start imagining such a puerile fantasy?”

Kazuya’s face turned bright red. “You ... you don’t have to call it ‘lust’!”

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth. A thin plume of white smoke wound its way to the ceiling.

Then she put the last fragment into words. “Kujou. When you were walking on that deserted road, you spotted a girl in the corner of your eye. Most likely a cute blond one. You identified the killer without even knowing it, and wove her into your fantasy.”

five

[5]

{Motorbike Beheading Case, Solved!

Acclaimed Inspector de Blois Awarded Police Commendation!}

The next morning arrived.

Just as usual, Kazuya awoke earlier than the other students in the dormitory. He walked down to the dining room, greeted the housemother, and started on his breakfast. She had slipped the choicest slice of ham onto his plate, perhaps as a gesture of apology. Then she returned to reading the newspaper, seated in her usual position on a stool with her legs crossed and a cigarette dangling out of her mouth.

Kazuya glanced in the housemother's direction. When his eyes happened to land on the headline on the front page, he jumped out of his seat in surprise. He asked to borrow the newspaper from her, then frantically skimmed the article.

It said: "By means of inspector de Blois' deductions, the culprit was apprehended at a surgical hospital—shockingly enough, it turned out to be a beautiful, blond-haired young girl?! Her motive remains unknown, but in return for solving the case with his usual amazing speed, the inspector was granted a special commendation from the police department...."

A photograph of the captured criminal—a girl with downcast eyes—accompanied the article. Kazuya's gaze was immediately drawn to her hands, where a bandage was wrapped around her fingertips.

This is just as Victorique said. But...

Exactly what was the nature of Victorique's relationship with this inspector, who had snatched away the credit for cracking the case?

Kazuya was filled with unanswered questions. And that girl, who solved mysteries with her startlingly sharp mind, was the biggest, strangest puzzle of all.

The sun shone with dazzling light, the polar opposite of the weather on the previous day. Despite the many worries crowding his thoughts, Kazuya prepared for school as he normally did. He neatly donned the hat that was part of his school uniform, straightened his posture, and set off toward the classroom building. Once he entered the classroom, he walked directly to his seat, speaking to no one. It was the same way Kazuya had begun every school day for the past half year. But he had added one more habit to his routine without realizing it.

His eyes slid to the empty seat by the window.

And he thought of the enigmatic girl who should have been there, but never was.

A slight smile flitted across his face.

Now I know who's supposed to be sitting in that seat. That girl, that mysterious creature—she must be in that library right about now, attending her own kind of school in the middle of that garden, with her “wellspring of wisdom” and her books spread all around her, enjoying her rendezvous with chaos. Victorique ... you really are a strange one!

Kazuya chuckled, amused at the thought.

Maybe I'll take her some more unusual things to eat. At least she seemed to be pleased with the hina-arare. Oh, Victorique, your mouth was so full, you looked like a squirrel stuffing its cheeks full of nuts....

The bell rang.

Until Miss Cécile entered the classroom, the day had shown no signs of being anything other than an ordinary one.

That is, until a tall girl walked in after her.

She possessed a slim and athletic build. Her thick blond hair, cut short, curled around her face and accentuated her refined bone structure. Even someone looking at her from afar would have been taken with her radiant beauty.

Miss Cécile beamed. “Allow me to introduce a new exchange student from

England, Avril Bradley. Let's all give her a warm welcome!"

The girl smiled, and inclined her head politely.

Miss Cécile quickly scanned the classroom. "Let's see, where should we put you.... Well, the seat next to Kujou is empty."

Jolted from his wandering thoughts, Kazuya hastily nodded. His eyes met with Avril's, and she gave him a warm smile. He blushed, feeling a little shy.

Avril walked to the seat beside Kazuya, moving with elegant, mincing steps as if she were walking on a cloud. She placed her satchel on her desk, but it fell to the floor just as she was about to sit down.

Kazuya, conscientious to a fault, picked up Avril's fallen bag for her. She looked at him with slightly raised eyebrows.

"Ça va?" asked Kazuya.

"Ça va. Merci," she answered, smiling as she took the bag from him. Her sunny expression, lacking any trace of darkness, shone as resplendently as a flower unfurling its petals.

Hit by the sudden realization that this encounter was just like the one he had fantasied about, Kazuya stiffened in surprise. Avril turned toward the blackboard, the smile still on her face.

However...

Kazuya's eyes drifted away from her face to focus on her hand, which was placed on her desk. He was startled to see a bandage wrapped around the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. She was injured.

It couldn't be.... Kazuya gulped.

He remembered the husky voice of the mysterious girl in the library tower. *The real killer is a blond girl. Her fingers are wounded....*

Kazuya abruptly jumped to his feet, rattling his chair loudly. Miss Cécile and the rest of the class turned around to look at the source of the sound. Flustered, he sat down again, and placed his head in his hands.

A blond girl.

Wounds on her fingers.

This exchange student from England, Avril Bradley, fulfilled both conditions!

It couldn't be! It has to be coincidence. I mean, they've already caught the real killer. Those bandages must be from some other injury. It's just ... a coincidence...

A warm spring breeze wafted in from the window, rustling the long hair and skirts of the female students.

Right, it's springtime.... Kazuya whispered to himself dazedly.

"The reaper who comes in spring brings death to the school"!

The girl sensed Kazuya's stare, and turned around to look at him. Detecting the suspicion in his eyes, her previous carefree expression turned intimidating, as if she had suddenly turned into a completely different person. Within an instant, her eyes had narrowed into a glare.

Is this girl really just an exchange student? I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about her....

Kazuya returned her gaze without wavering. Before long, she looked away.

Kazuya Kujou, the third son of an imperial soldier, came to Sauvure from a certain country in the Orient, and met the mysterious girl Victorique, who was secluded among the tropical plants and esoteric books at the top floor of the library tower. The two of them would come to befriend each other, and uncover the various secrets of the school one by one.

They would first embark on an adventure to solve the mysteries surrounding the enigmatic transfer student Avril Bradley, and a purple book of sinister witchcraft. But that is an entirely different story....

prologue

chapter two — an ill fate befalls those who tread on the thirteenth stair

prologue

Pitch black—

The air was parched.

A corsage of pale primroses, damp with evening dew as if they had been just plucked from a field, fluttered in the dark.

A young man wearing the garb of a medieval knight clutched the corsage to his chest. He exhaled quietly, and in a voice so soft that it could be mistaken for a sigh, whispered, “Together...”

The sound trailed off into silence.

“...Forever...”

The primroses seemed to droop and lose their radiance, as if his words had drained the life out of them.

In a tightly sealed subterranean room that lacked all illumination, the knight continued to calmly breathe in and out, clasping the corsage motionlessly.

There was no other sound in the room.

Until finally, he repeated his words once more.

“...Together forever...”

And then many long years passed....

one

[1]

It was a bright springtime afternoon.

St. Marguerite's Library was housed in a square tower that soared high into the sky. Inside, walls formed by huge bookshelves surrounded an atrium, which was permeated with a slightly damp atmosphere that could only be described as the scent of books.

This library was one of the most famous structures on the campus of the distinguished St. Marguerite's School, nestled in a mountain range in the northern reaches of the Kingdom of Sauvure, a country known as the "little giant" of Western Europe. The library's long labyrinthine staircase, said to have been deliberately constructed in the form of a maze to hide a king's secret trysts with his lover, seemed to stretch all the way to the heavens.

Near the ceiling was an unusual conservatory lush with vegetation, lit up by rays of the sun that emanated from skylights. From here, a thin plume of smoke rose into the air, reproducing the scene that Kazuya had stumbled across the other day.

It came from a white ceramic pipe, held by a girl small enough and beautiful enough to be mistaken for a porcelain doll. Her emerald green eyes were lost in a state of deep meditation, focusing intently on the undulating tendrils of smoke.

Her magnificently long blond hair draped to the floor like an unwound velvet turban. A pink velvet lace-up ribbon emerged from her breakably thin back, drooping downward like the furled wings of a small bird. Upon the lap of her billowing dress, luxuriously embroidered in countless rows of white ladder lace, sat a heavy, opened book.

Books radiated out in all directions on the floor next to her. Curiously enough, the spaces between them were dotted here and there in pink marshmallows.

The girl suddenly stirred.

She had heard the sound of someone entering the library, vigorously opening

the leather-covered swing door hammered through with round brass tacks.

The girl poked her head through the bars of the railing and looked down. She knitted her brows ever so slightly.

It was impossible to tell whether her pale green eyes belonged to an innocent child or to an old woman who had lived for too long. She leaned her tiny body against the railing and looked downstairs as if something had caught her interest. But the expression on her small, marvelously proportioned face, remained stony, clouded in weariness, the face of a cold doll.

The figure who had just entered the library, on the other hand...

“...I don’t really want to see her. I wonder what I should do.”

The figure stood in the library atrium, muttering under his breath in apprehension.

Thanks to the stellar grades he had earned in his home country in the Orient, Kazuya Kujou, fifteen years of age, had recently arrived in Sauvure to study abroad. But because of a superstition circulating amongst his classmates that “the traveler who comes in spring brings death to the school,” they had nicknamed him the Grim Reaper. For the past half year, his days had been full of hardships, and he was still unable to make any close friends.

Then, just three days ago, he accidentally became embroiled in a murder case, and just so happened to meet this mysterious girl at the top of the library (in fact, she was his classmate, but she spent all her time in the library and had never once come to class). With the help of her intellectual powers—which she referred to as her “wellspring of wisdom”—he had just been rescued from a dangerous situation.

“Hmm.... There’s definitely something I want to ask her about.... But I can’t really figure that girl out, and she seems kind of scary.... She might actually hate me.... Achoo!” Kazuya sneezed.

Although it was springtime, a cold wind still blew with the lingering scent of winter. As he sniffled, he saw something fall from the top of the library and flutter towards his head.

It was a single sheet of white gossamer.

Upon examination, it was a piece of tissue.

Kazuya reached out to catch it, then blew his nose with it. For a moment he stared at the tissue, deep in thought. Then, realizing that the person he was planning to meet at the top must have dropped it for him, his eyes opened wide with surprise, then lit up in a joyful smile. Looking up at the top of the tower, he called out, “Victorique! It’s me, Kujou!”

He began to enthusiastically climb the labyrinthine staircase.

Several minutes later...

Panting heavily, Kazuya gripped the railing with one hand, spent from climbing the never-ending stairs. He greeted the girl—Victorique—who was smoking her pipe.

“Hi, Victorique. Thank you for the tissue.”

“...”

She said nothing in reply, instead keeping her head buried in the book she was reading.

Kazuya sat down beside her. “And, thanks for the other day.”

“...”

“So, um, there’s another thing that I kind of wanted to talk to you about.”

“...”

“Victorique. Are you listening...?”

Several moments passed with no response. Her doll-like profile conveyed nothing except an imperturbable coldness that rebuffed all interaction. Just as he was about to run out of patience, Victorique finally spoke coolly, without bothering to lift her head from her book.

“Don’t get so close to me. It’s a nuisance.”

“Wh-what do you mean?!” he replied indignantly.

“You’re the Grim Reaper, aren’t you?”

Kazuya had been growing steadily more infuriated with Victorique’s brusque attitude, but her mention of the “Grim Reaper” threw him off balance.

“So? What’s your point?!”

Up to that moment, Victorique’s eyes had been fixed on her books. But at the sound of Kazuya’s shout, they widened slightly in surprise. A fresh breeze seemed to breathe the slightest puff of life into her icy expression, piercing through her veil of boredom.

“There’s another reaper. She’s the one who’s the real Grim Reaper!” exclaimed Kazuya.

“...’She’?”

“I mean Avril Bradley! That transfer student from England. She may look like a regular cute girl on the outside, but on the inside she’s hiding some—Hmm? What’s that for?”

Still continuing to face away from him, Victorique held out one of her hands, which were as small as those of a child.

Kazuya gazed at her palm curiously. “...What?”

She waved her hand at him a few times, saying nothing.

“Tch! I get it. You want those exotic snacks of yours, right?” Kazuya dipped his head in defeat.

This girl, whose favorite phrase was “tedium is my greatest enemy,” was unwilling to aid Kazuya unless he gave her unusual snacks with which to amuse her. And so, before coming to the library, he had returned to the dormitory to empty out the luggage he had brought from his home in search of some interesting dried sweets.

While solemnly brooding over whether or not this could be considered bribery, he packed a small bag full of snacks to take with him.

“Here, Victorique. This is some candy that my big sister sent me. It’s called [*kaminari-okoshi*](#).”

Victorique, who had been ignoring Kazuya all this time, suddenly raised her head, an expression of intense curiosity on her face. She set her book on the floor, shoved her hand inside the bag, and began to blissfully stuff her mouth full with candy, while grasping the bag greedily like a small animal guarding its food.

“Munch, munch... What is this? Why is it so absurdly hard? Do you consider this some sort of delicacy?”

“Something like that. Anyway, Victorique...” Kazuya carefully monitored her face as she chewed.

Victorique sighed. “Very well. If there’s something you want to say so badly, go ahead and tell me.”

two

[2]

That morning, Kazuya exited the boys' dormitory at exactly his usual time and headed toward the classroom building, walking with perfectly straight posture.

It was a sunny day. A sweet scent wafted from the riotously colorful flower beds that dotted the campus, which was built in the style of a French garden. Normally, Kazuya would have rushed straight to class, but this morning he couldn't help but slow his steps and admire the flowers and green-leafed trees.

As Kazuya approached the front of the building, a feminine voice called out to him. "Um, excuse me.... You must be the boy who sits next to me; Kujou, I think it was?"

He turned around and saw a familiar figure standing there. It was his classmate, Avril Bradley, who had just arrived from England a few days ago. She was a beautiful, vivacious young girl with short blond hair and long, sturdy legs.

"Hey, let's go inside together!" Avril ran up alongside Kazuya, taking no heed of his shy body language. A jovial, unclouded smile beamed across her distinctly mature-looking face. "So you're a foreign student too, Kujou?"

Kazuya nodded, feeling slightly tense. "Y-yeah..."

Walking next to Kazuya, Avril looked very tall for a girl. She was as tall as he was, and bore a robust physique that seemed more suitable for an adult woman than a girl.

Kazuya suddenly felt suspicious of whether this girl was really fifteen years old. But Avril was oblivious to his silence, and instead continued talking on cheerfully.

"You know, this school is pretty weird. It's been around for a long time, so the buildings, the gardens, and the dorm all look really old. The school I went to in England was newly built, so I find this a pretty refreshing change. Hey, did you know that the students here have a bunch of ghost stories about this place?"

"...Are you referring to the 'reaper who comes in spring'?"

“What’s that? No, the one I heard was called, ‘don’t step on the thirteenth stair’. They said that there’s a teacher who hanged herself on the thirteenth step, and she tries to drag people into hell. Ha, ha, ha!” Avril’s lovely face dissolved into laughter. “Why would a spirit still be hanging around the world of the living? That’s so stupid; who could possibly believe that?”

Apparently, this girl was not the sort who believed in ghost stories or superstitions.

“But it’s still kind of fun, you know? I get excited. This is where Avril starts her adventure, ’cause my grandpa was an adventurer, too. Have you ever heard of Sir Bradley? He traveled across Africa in a jeep, and crossed the Atlantic in a hot-air balloon.”

The name sounded somehow familiar to Kazuya. Perhaps he had read it in a newspaper article before.

“Although, he did end up disappearing somewhere with that balloon....”

Right, that was the article.

“My dream is to become an incredible adventurer just like my grandpa. Right now, what I want is a license to fly a plane, plus a motorbike, although I could use some new dresses, too....”

The image of Avril floating away in a hot-air balloon, screaming, rose unbidden in Kazuya’s mind.

Then, in a flash, her expression turned serious. Now she seemed like a completely different person from the cute, bubbly schoolgirl she was before. An ominous cloud passed over her features as she lowered her voice. “Actually... I came to this school to look for something. Something very important to me.”

“What would that be?”

“It’s ... a secret!”

“Oh...?”

As he chatted with Avril, Kazuya took a careful look at her hand.

The fingers on her right hand were wrapped in a white bandage.

A murder case had occurred nearby only a few days before. Kazuya had been mistaken for the culprit, but thanks to Victorique, the tiny genius detective, the case had been solved and the real killer arrested ... or so he thought.

But there was one issue that refused to leave Kazuya's mind—namely, a certain characteristic of the killer. According to Victorique, the culprit was a pretty blond-haired girl with injured fingers. Sure enough, a girl matching that description was later apprehended, and she confessed to her crime.

But Avril, who had enrolled in school immediately afterward, also happened to be a pretty blond-haired girl with injured fingers....

Was this truly just coincidence? Or could the real killer still be on the loose?

"...Avril, what happened to your hand?" Kazuya asked, his gaze still on her fingers.

Avril's smile vanished. "...Nothing happened."

"Oh? Is that right?"

Avril was silent.

Kazuya surveyed her stony demeanor, his suspicions mounting. She was definitely hiding something behind her menacing expression, which was completely different from the one she had previously worn as a lively, innocent girl.

There's something strange about her....

The next moment, they saw Miss Cécile rush out of the building. She caught sight of the two of them, and waved.

Miss Cécile was Victorique's teacher in addition to being their own teacher. She was a petite young woman with shoulder-length brown hair, her sweet, slightly babyish face hidden behind large, round glasses.

"Just in time. Can you two help me with something after class?" she said cheerily.

Avril smiled and nodded, then went on to tell the teacher how much she was enjoying the school. Kazuya kept a careful eye on her expression, wondering if what he saw was just his imagination. He was beginning to feel embarrassed

with himself for thinking too much about such morbid things.

Miss Cécile said that she wanted the two of them to attend a funeral service with her. An elderly man who had worked for many years as a caretaker for the school had died of an illness, and a simple funeral would be held for him after class in the cemetery of the small chapel on campus.

Consequently, after class ended, Kazuya and Avril accompanied Miss Cécile to the cemetery, which was opposite the school library.

St. Marguerite's School was a majestically built institution occupying a large plot of land at the base of a mountain range. Sprawling across gently sloping terrain, the campus was cut off from the outside world by a tall hedge encircling the premises like the wall of a fort. With the help of the gardeners, the shapes of animals and castles were lovingly pruned into the sides of the hedge to mark each season.

And in the center of the grounds, a large, stately building in the shape of the letter U towered over the rest of the campus, which was laid out in imitation of a French-style garden. The student dormitories, cafeterias, school library, and the chapel jutted out from the landscape. Flower gardens, lawns, ponds, and water fountains dotted the expansive campus, the spaces between them forming a beautiful and spacious park-like path.

Kazuya was familiar with the chapel, but it seemed to be Avril's first time encountering it. She exclaimed in delight at the sight of the old chapel, built in imposing Gothic style, and the dilapidated mausoleum, as if she had seen something extraordinary. "How marvelous!"

But Kazuya didn't think so. As far as he was concerned, the chapel only exuded a gloomy atmosphere that made him want to avoid going anywhere near it.

The mausoleum in question was erected squarely in the middle of the cemetery. Under a huge cross stood an iron door, and beyond it lay a vast, dark chamber built in the manner of a maze, where numerous corpses rested upon slabs.

Avril said that the setting reminded her of the location of the final scene in

“Romeo and Juliet,” where the two lovers had poisoned themselves and died. It was an apt comparison.

Miss Cécile commented, “It’s been a long time since anyone’s come here, ever since a student died eight years ago. That was the last time it was opened. Fortunately, in the meantime we haven’t had any more deaths of anyone connected to the school.”

She handed a key to the burly men who had come from the undertaker’s, and they attempted to open the iron door to the mausoleum. But the key was rusted and refused to fit into the lock.

A strong breeze blew through the cemetery, rustling Avril’s and Miss Cécile’s hair.

Finally, the key turned, but this time the door itself was too stiff and wouldn’t budge. One of the undertakers looked over his shoulder and beckoned for Kazuya’s assistance. Kazuya joined them in their struggle to pull open the door.

The door gave a loud creak, and at last began to move. The smell of rusted iron assailed their noses.

And the moment the door opened, an object directly facing Kazuya slowly tipped forward....

It was a corpse.

three

[3]

“...Well, you *are* the Grim Reaper.” Victorique sourly interrupted Kazuya’s story.

“Don’t call me that!”

“This candy is too hard.... I don’t want it!” She flung away the piece of kaminari-okoshi.

Kazuya picked it up and reluctantly took a nibble from it, then sighed. “...Listen to me. As I was saying.”

What had fallen on top of Kazuya was the waxen body of a dead man. His eye sockets had caved in and the flesh of his cheeks had dried up, the agony of his death forever preserved on his face.

The man wore a peculiar outfit. He was dressed in the full garb of a medieval knight, his breast adorned with a primrose corsage.

As the corpse tumbled down upon Kazuya, the bones of its skull, torso, and wrists detached and fell to the floor with a rattling sound. The dried primroses crumbled into dust and scattered into the wind.

Miss Cécile swooned.

The undertakers shouted in alarm.

And then...

“...Avril did something strange,” whispered Kazuya. “I think I’m the only one who saw it, though....”

Avril didn’t utter a single sound. Kazuya turned to Miss Cécile, but in that second, he caught a glimpse of fluid movement, as if a wild animal had darted across his peripheral vision. Startled, he followed Avril with his eyes, and saw her

jump over the dismembered corpse. She landed gracefully in the center of the burial vault, then leaned over to pick something up from the floor.

“...She picked something up?”

Kazuya nodded. “It was a book. A thin book with a purple cover.”

“Oh?”

“And she quickly hid it in her bag. Then I heard her muttering, ‘What’s this doing here?’”

“...How odd.”

“I thought so, too. Maybe that book’s the thing she said she was looking for. But why would it be there? And I wonder what kind of book it was?”

Victorique opened her mouth in a wide yawn. “Fascinating...”

“L-let’s be serious now. Isn’t that definitely strange behavior? And then you said that the killer from that murder case a few days ago would be a pretty blond girl with wounded fingers. It could just be a coincidence, but Avril fits that description, too....”

“You realize the killer in that case was already arrested,” said Victorique wearily.

“I know.... But I’ve been wondering. What if the ‘reaper who comes in spring’ is actually Avril....”

Victorique ignored his murmur. She took the bag of kaminari-okoshi away from him and started gnawing at the candy again, apparently finding it to her tastes despite her complaints. “In any case, the fact that the body fell just as the door was being opened indicates that he was alive when the door was locked. This means that someone locked him alive inside a dark crypt, and he died on his feet, having used the last of his strength to call for help.”

Kazuya gulped, thinking that what she said made a lot of sense. “You’re right.... Since he was wearing historical-looking clothing, I had thought that he must have died long ago. But would this mean he was locked inside the crypt when it was last opened eight years ago...?”

In that case, it wouldn't be very long ago at all. Kazuya fell silent for a few moments, remembering the corpse's face, frozen in an agonized scream.

"...Then, the murder must have occurred there eight years ago. But what could that possibly have to do with that purple book left behind at the scene of the crime, and that English girl who took it without telling anyone—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a loud rattle.

A discordant groan erupted from the direction of the hydraulic elevator. The vibrations from its ascent shook the branches on the trees in the conservatory.

The iron cage screeched, then halted. The metal latticed doors creaked open.

Leaning on the door with his arms folded, a fashionably dressed man stood inside, striking a pose.

He sported a three-piece suit with a flamboyant ascot tie at his neck and silver cufflinks at his wrists. And on his head, ruining the effect of his impeccable wardrobe, was that inscrutable hairstyle, swept forward and hardened into a point.

It was the inspector Gréville de Blois. Only a few days ago, he had attempted to arrest Kazuya as the suspect of a murder investigation. As far as Kazuya knew, he was a thoroughly odious man who had joined the police force on a whim, abusing his privilege as a nobleman.

Victorique needed only to glance at him for a second before swiftly averting her eyes. She thrust her face back into her books, and began to emphatically smoke her pipe.

Likewise, Inspector de Blois gave her no more than a brief look, and made no attempt to verbally acknowledge her. Instead, he unexpectedly turned to Kazuya and greeted him amiably, "Why, if it isn't Kujou!"

"...Is there something you want?" said Kazuya, recoiling a step. The smile on the inspector's face made him shudder.

"Thanks to my brilliant mind, you were able to escape the dishonor of being labeled a convicted murderer."

“...Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“If you feel like repaying the favor, please don’t hesitate. But no, what I came to talk about is actually the case of the mummified knight from this morning....”

Apparently, the inspector had come to the school immediately after having been assigned to oversee the investigation. Kazuya furtively peeked over the side of the maze of stairs, and saw that the two deputies who had accompanied the inspector the other day were standing near the entrance to the library. They were holding hands once again, their heads cocked to the side as they looked up at him with uneasy expressions.

Kazuya remembered the time several days ago when the inspector had last come to the library. At first he assumed Kazuya to be the culprit and insisted on arresting him, but once he heard the truth that Victorique had pieced together from her “wellspring of wisdom”, he left to immediately apprehend the real killer. And now he had taken the credit for himself.

For some reason, he was acclaimed as a great detective, but by all appearances, he didn’t seem to be remotely deserving of the epithet. Could it be that this was in fact the way he solved all of his cases?

But although this mysterious inspector and Victorique seemed to already be acquainted, they clearly couldn’t stand each other. Reenacting their behavior from several days ago, they refused to even look at one another, much less exchange any words. The situation deeply baffled Kazuya, who was stuck in the middle.

He carefully observed Victorique for her reaction. Her expression seemed to be frostier than ever.

She removed the pipe from her mouth. “Why don’t you listen to what he has to say, Kujou. I’ll just be here reading my books. It doesn’t mean that I have to be the one to listen to him.”

Inspector de Blois twitched.

“...Well, if I do happen to overhear anything, Kujou, perhaps I’ll give you my personal opinion. We can leave Gréville out of it.”

“Um, okay... Well...”

Kazuya looked at her, then at the inspector. They were both facing away from each other.

What on earth is going on here...?! he thought to himself, bewildered.

Ignoring Kazuya's state of confusion, Inspector de Blois said, "In that case, Kujou, you and I just happen to be here having a chat. I'll begin, then."

"Right..."

Keeping his gaze firmly directed toward Kazuya, the inspector began to speak. But when Kazuya glanced at Victorique, he could tell from looking at her small, dainty ears that she too was secretly paying attention, even while her face was glued to her books....

"We have determined that that corpse that fell out of the mausoleum appears to belong to an enigmatic man by the name of Maxim. After graduating from this school, he developed the habit of materializing out of nowhere every spring, coming back here to stay for a time, then taking off again. Since this man was rumored to engage in fraud, extortion, burglary, and various other crimes, he had made a lot of enemies in various places, and was presumably murdered by one of them. The reports of his physical appearance and last known location match up perfectly with this corpse. Apparently, he was quite the handsome fellow. Well, anyhow, it seems that eight years ago in the springtime, he came back to the school for a few weeks, but suddenly vanished without a trace, with his personal belongings still left behind in his room."

The inspector paused, then sighed.

"But there are still questions left unanswered. Who killed him? Why was he killed in such a place? The mausoleum was last opened eight years ago. That teacher, Cécile or whatever her name was, said that a female student who died after a long illness was laid to rest there, and that the door hadn't been opened since. Although apparently the key was stolen shortly before her funeral. Afterwards, the lock was changed, and the new key was placed under strict safekeeping. But even supposing anyone wanted to sneak into the crypt, it isn't as if they would find anything valuable there. After all, there's nothing but dead bodies inside...."

The inspector smiled to himself. Then his face turned serious.

“In fact, the key seems to have rusted through. By the way, I found out the undertakers who worked on the funeral eight years ago are the same ones working this time, so I had a chat with them. They said that, obviously, they hadn’t seen Maxim at the last funeral, whether inside or outside of the crypt. The undertakers entered the crypt themselves, so I take their word for it. After they inspected the area, they interred the girl’s body, then left and locked the door. In the past eight years, no one has opened that door. Now, that being said, how the devil could Maxim have gotten inside? And for what purpose?”

His face twisted in disgust, and then he continued, “Why would Maxim be wearing the costume of a medieval knight at the time of his death eight years ago? What’s the meaning of the primrose corsage pinned to his chest?”

He paused, then lowered his voice. “The biggest issue is, if Maxim didn’t willingly enter the crypt, then of course that would make this a murder case. Because that would mean someone shut him inside while he was still alive. A murder that occurred eight years ago—and I have no doubt the killer is still somewhere in this school, living a carefree existence under all of our noses. This is an unpardonable crime, my boy!”

As Inspector de Blois finished speaking, he glowered at nothing in particular. The rays of the sun shining in from the skylights glistened upon his pointed hair, highlighting it in shimmering gold.

“...Hmm.” Victorique looked up from her books.

Kazuya raised his eyebrows. He saw a faint blush appear on Victorique’s face. A small spark of energy seemed to replace the boredom and weariness that had previously filled her expression. Perhaps she was starting to feel interested.

“What are you thinking?” he asked her.

“This is some considerable chaos. Although, it isn’t such a complicated matter after all.” Victorique reached out to take some candy. She lifted it to her mouth with her two small hands, then spoke while chewing. “Munch, munch... The truth is actually very simple. Munch, munch. In order to relieve my boredom, this ‘wellspring of wisdom’ of mine has attempted to amuse itself by reconstructing these fragments of chaos. It’s an extremely straightforward thing.”

Victorique yawned sleepily. Then, noticing Kazuya and Inspector de Blois waiting impatiently for her next words, she added irritably, “Still, there is one fragment left. Naturally, this is the result of your carelessness, Gréville.”

“What!?”

“If you want to know the truth, assemble the fragments and bring them to me.” She turned away from them. “The two of you shall go to the undertakers and ask them this question. Pay attention to what I am about to say. Ask them, ‘Is there a corpse missing from the crypt?’”

Kazuya and the inspector exchanged looks.

four

[4]

“...For God’s sake, why does she always have to take on that arrogant tone. This is why I hate grey wolves,” grumbled Inspector de Blois as he walked toward the village.

“...‘Grey wolves’?” asked Kazuya.

The inspector said nothing. The expression on his face was not only full of anger, but was also tense, as if he were fearful of something. He continued muttering to himself, “How can she do this to me when I’m busy enough with other cases...”

It appeared that the police department had received some cryptic information regarding a famous thief who was about to strike the village, and was scrambling to put together a response.

But that had to be set aside for now. The inspector and his two deputies—and Kazuya, who for some reason was forced to tag along with them—went to the outskirts of town to interview the undertakers. After questioning them according to Victorique’s orders, they rushed back to examine the crypt.

“There’s definitely one body missing.” The younger undertaker pointed inside. “They were interred in chronological order, but there’s one empty slab in the inner chamber.”

The older undertaker reacted in surprise. “That can’t be. They should all be in their proper places. I made sure of it when I last came in here eight years ago.”

Pushing aside the younger man, he barged into the crypt. Then he raised his voice in a startled shout. “You’re right! There’s one missing!? That’s odd.... How did this happen?”

The undertakers and the inspector gave each other a look.

On their way back to the school, Kazuya heard the inspector mumbling to

himself, “A missing body... a primrose corsage...” On occasion, he groaned aloud, “That damned grey wolf!”

With each exclamation he heard, Kazuya would cock his head to the side in perplexity, wondering what was on the inspector’s mind this time.

After returning to campus, they walked along the white pebbled road that led to the library. Then Kazuya saw the library’s leather-covered swing door open, and the familiar figure of a girl jump outside—it was Avril Bradley.

Kazuya let slip a sound of surprise, which caught the attention of the inspector. “What is it, Kujou?”

“Well...” Kazuya remembered the trouble he had gone through several days ago after the inspector had mistaken him for being the perpetrator of a murder case. He felt reluctant to mention Avril to him when all he had to go on was his gut feeling. “No, it’s nothing....”

The clouded, menacing expression on Avril’s face as she walked away gave Kazuya the same funny feeling in the pit of his stomach as before. Her face looked nothing like that of an innocent young girl. But if her cheerful side was nothing more than an act, then who was the real Avril?

He entered the library, his thoughts in turmoil. *I wonder what Avril was doing in here?* he thought, surveying his surroundings. He saw nothing amiss. The library looked the same way it always did.

Am I just over-thinking all of this...?

Inspector de Blois walked into the elevator and departed for the top floor.

Several minutes later...

By the time Kazuya, gasping for breath, had finished climbing the labyrinthine staircase to the garden where Victorique would be, he found her waiting silently together with the inspector.

A breeze from the skylights rustled the leaves of the trees.

“...So, Kujou.” The inspector was the first one to break the stillness. “It seems that one body was missing.”

“...I already know that. I was there with you at the time.”

“Then who is the killer?”

“Like I said, inspector.... Ask Victorique, not me....”

“You promised that if we gathered the last fragment, you would tell me the name of the killer.”

“Inspector!”

Without bothering to raise her head from her book, Victorique asked, “What is the name of the student who died eight years ago?”

The inspector’s shoulders twitched. “Millie Marle. What does that have to do with it?”

Now she lifted her head swiftly. “That is the name of your killer,” she said, her pipe still in her mouth.

An abrupt silence pervaded the garden. Kazuya and the inspector stared at Victorique, their mouths opened in shock.

“...Huh?”

“Millie Marle is the killer.”

“How can that be, Kujou? Millie was already dead at the time of her funeral!”

“As I keep telling you, inspector, I’m not the one who...” Kazuya turned to Victorique. “Can you explain? Surely you don’t mean she faked her death?”

“No, she probably was dead. In other words, this would be a killing committed by the dead.”

A thin strand of white smoke rose up in a straight line from Victorique’s pipe. She removed the book from her lap, and gave the two men a hard look. Her eyes were curiously bright. For once, she didn’t seem cold or blasé.

A thought suddenly occurred to Kazuya: *She’s not a bad girl at all. It’s just that she’s a very unusual sort of person....*

Victorique began to speak. “I can only imagine the chain of events that led to it, but while she was on her deathbed, Millie Marle chose Maxim to be her companion in death’s journey. After all, the knight is duty-bound to protect his

lady.”

“So is that the meaning behind that costume?”

“That’s not all. Now, here we have three fragments of chaos. One is the costume of a medieval knight. The second is the stolen key. And the last one is the missing corpse from the previous burials. It’s possible to reconstruct these fragments as follows. Millie Marle used a sedative to put Maxim to sleep, and dressed him in the coat of armor. Then she used the stolen key to enter the crypt, and substituted the body of the unconscious Maxim, disguised as a knight, into the place of a very old corpse wearing a suit of armor. After this, she died. When Millie Marle’s body was placed inside the crypt, Maxim was still sleeping inside. It’s a pity he didn’t realize that he was meant to accompany her in eternal rest. The undertakers were no better. Inside the dark crypt, they didn’t notice that one of the corpses they had long been used to seeing had been exchanged with a fresh body. Thus the deceased Millie Marle was laid to rest, and the door was tightly shut. Once Maxim awoke, it was pitch dark, and he was surrounded by dead bodies. Perhaps he discovered the dead girl and realized what had happened. Or perhaps, in that darkness, he was unable to discern the truth.... Regardless of his reaction, the door had already been sealed.”

Victorique fell silent.

Kazuya had gone pale in horror. He glanced at Inspector de Blois next to him, and saw him looking at his feet, his face also drained of color. “How ghastly!” he whispered.

Meanwhile, Victorique gazed into empty space with eyes like moist glass beads, as if she saw all human concerns, be they good or evil, terrifying or delightful, as objects on a distant shore.

This girl is definitely an unusual sort of person, thought Kazuya again.

Victorique parted her lips. “Of course, I have no proof. Moreover, this is something that happened eight years ago. But it makes sense this way.”

A heavy silence enshrouded the conservatory.

Then Kazuya heard a rustling sound.

He looked up, and saw Inspector de Blois scramble to his feet. Turning away

from them, he rushed inside the iron cage of the elevator.

Neither Victorique nor Kazuya bothered to bid him goodbye. Instead, Kazuya shouted after him angrily, “Inspector, please show your gratitude to Victorique. She *did* solve the case for you.”

The inspector looked over his shoulder, and shrugged. “What are you talking about, Kujou? I merely came to ask for your account as an eyewitness. Farewell!”

The iron grill clanged shut.

“How dare you...!”

Victorique took no notice of Kazuya’s rage. She looked up and called out, “Gréville,” her voice weary.

The inspector turned around, his face strained with irritation. The expression in his eyes betrayed the slightest hint of anxiety. “What?” he asked, a quaver in his voice.

A shift in atmosphere enveloped them once again. The inspector, looking much like a frightened child, watched the small girl warily. She returned his gaze calmly.

And then there was that almost palpable ringing sound, when adult and child switched places in that strange instant....

“Investigate the relationship between those two—between Millie Marle and Maxim. It seems that Maxim was quite the lady killer. However, the motive for her crime is hidden in that bouquet of primroses.”

Kazuya recalled the primroses that adorned the corpse’s chest. When the body fell to pieces on the floor, the flowers disintegrated and were swept away by the wind.

“In the language of flowers, primroses mean ‘together forever.’ So long, Gréville.”

Inspector de Blois’ dumbfounded face was slowly engulfed by the floor as the elevator descended. The second before he disappeared from view, Kazuya thought he saw his face crumple in unmistakable chagrin....

five

[5]

With Inspector de Blois' departure, the lush garden at the top floor of St. Marguerite's Library once again returned to its original stillness.

Victorique yawned widely, then put her book back on her lap and began to read intently once again. With immense speed, she skimmed through the pages of the thick book written in impenetrable Latin.

Kazuya watched her in the corner of his eye, then finally gathered up the courage to interrupt her reading. "Say, Victorique."

"Hmm?! Kujou, you're still here?"

"Yes. I've been here the whole time, Victorique," he said. "I can see that you have Maxim's murder eight years ago all worked out. But there's one thing you haven't mentioned."

"Now what?! You really are a pushy fellow!" exclaimed Victorique peevishly.

Taken aback by her outburst, Kazuya stuttered, "Wh-what are you getting so angry for? This *is* what I originally came to ask you about. Don't tell me you forgot?"

"Hmph. I couldn't possibly forget. It's just that you keep getting more and more annoying."

"If that's the way it is, then give me back my kaminari-okoshi!"

"Mmm?"

They glared at each other.

Intense sunlight pierced through the skylights and shone brightly upon their faces.

"...My goodness, Kujou. You truly are a loudmouthed fellow."

"And you, Victorique, are spiteful, capricious, and cruel."

"This place is supposed to be a tranquil paradise filled with books, where one

can indulge in knowledge and ennui without any intrusion. And here you are making a mess of things every time you climb up those stairs, shouting, making an absurd fuss over nothing. These past few days have been very bothersome for me.”

“B-but it’s just that ... you’ve been a great help to me....” Kazuya’s voice trembled slightly.

Victorique merely snorted and turned away from him.

“And I even brought you candy, hoping you would enjoy it...” He was growing more dejected with every word.

Victorique took a quick glance at his face, and was silent for a moment. Then she said, “...Be that as it may, I haven’t been bored at all.”

Kazuya’s face brightened in a flash.

“Even so, though my greatest enemy may be tedium, my second greatest enemy is commotion.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“That would make you my second greatest enemy come to chase away my greatest enemy.... Enough, go home. I’m tired of this racket.”

“Wait, Victorique! Honestly!” snapped Kazuya, swelling with indignation.

At last Victorique grudgingly closed her book, a defeated expression on her face. “For God’s sake, what do you want from me?!”

“I said, there was something I wanted you to explain to me. About that purple book that Avril picked up in the crypt.” As he spoke, Kazuya relived the scene in his mind. The image of the sinister expression on Avril’s face vividly overlapped the split-second glimpse he caught of that haunting deep purple book.

That sinister purple book...

That book, resting among the bodies in the crypt...

“Was that book what Avril came here to look for? Why would it be at the scene of a murder that happened eight years ago, let alone on the floor of a crypt that no one should have entered? Is she really just an innocent bystander? What sort

of book was that anyway?”

“...Is that all?”

“Yeah. Basically, it’s that book. That book was the issue all along. That book, that book, that book! And then Avril, too!”

With a note of true exasperation, Victorique replied, “If I solve this mystery, will you, my second greatest enemy, leave me be?”

Kazuya couldn’t help but feel glum when confronted with Victorique’s crystal clear irritation. *Do you really hate me that much...?* he wondered deep down. He nodded reluctantly, then said, “That reminds me.... Avril came to the library earlier. I wonder if she was looking for me?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, since I kind of ... witnessed her take that book, maybe she realized that I saw her. So...”

“Still, Kujou, if you really suspect her that much, wouldn’t you tell Gréville about it? But you haven’t done that.”

Kazuya guardedly shook his head. “I know.... It feels like Avril is suspicious, and at the same time also not. I didn’t want to deliver her into the inspector’s clutches when I don’t really know what’s going on....”

“Hmm...?” Victorique snorted, and gave Kazuya a condescending look.

“Wh-why are you looking at me like that?”

“In other words, what you mean is that you stayed silent out of a sense of compassion.”

“W-well, you could put it that way.”

“It’s my personal opinion that concepts like compassion are where intelligence goes to die. And you, Kujou, are the perfect embodiment of that.”

“...What’s that supposed to mean?! I’ve never been insulted like that in my life!” Kazuya again burst into a rage, his face turning pink.

Victorique began to say something, but cut herself off before she uttered a word.

Then she suddenly pushed herself against the railing, and stood up straight.

Kazuya, still feeling angry, stood up with her.

Victorique appeared to be of indeterminate age—she was surely older than her youthful face suggested, and yet her eyes were as sorrowful as those of an old person reaching the end of a life lived for too long. Once she stood up, Kazuya was shocked by the sight of her small head far below him. Even in comparison to a boy of short stature as he was, her head still came no further than his chest or abdomen.

In that moment, he realized that this was the first time he had seen Victorique on her feet.

Her body was much smaller than what he had imagined while she was still sitting. She looked more like an exquisitely crafted doll made of fine porcelain. Kazuya felt his astonishment absorb the anger smoldering in his chest, dissipating it with a gentle hiss. What was left was only his surprise as he carefully observed Victorique's strikingly small form.

Then his gaze fell upon the mountain of tremendously abstruse books she had scattered across the floor.

She had skimmed through these with incredible speed while speaking of her "wellspring of wisdom" in that husky voice, like that of an old woman, as she effortlessly solved outlandish cases. And yet that mind was contained in such a small body, as if belonging to some sublimely made doll...

Kazuya found this to be an entirely marvelous thing.

Just who exactly was this girl...?

He was suddenly reminded of the attitude the inspector took toward her, cringing in terror and refusing to even look at her, despite the fact that he relied on her intelligence to assist him.

And Kazuya also remembered those mysterious words of his...

Damned grey wolf...!

What was the meaning of those words, and why did his voice tremble so?

Who was Victorique really?

Kazuya thought of the strange cases that had occurred in the village and on campus in just a few days' time. These were certainly baffling mysteries. And yet...

He came to the sudden realization that Victorique herself was a greater mystery than any other.

Kazuya continued to carefully observe her, this enigmatic girl, her small body engulfed in lace and ribbons.

However, Victorique herself showed no indication of perceiving Kazuya's inner turmoil. Her tiny form stirred, and began to quickly descend the labyrinthine staircase. The large pink velvet ribbon pinned to the back of her dress flapped like the wings of a small bird about to fly, fluttering dreamily in time with her steps. The white ladder lace adorning her hemline quivered invitingly as she disappeared from sight.

Kazuya hurriedly chased after Victorique, who was swiftly flying away, like a bird emblazoned in white and pink, in ribbons and in lace. "Where are you going?"

Her voice rang out from a distance, its huskiness a sharp contrast to her appearance. "I am providing balm for your aching soul. That book, that book, that book! And that suspicious transfer student! For now, I shall find that book of yours. You could thank me at the very least!"

"I meant, why are you going downstairs? And how would you know where the book is? You've just been sitting up at the top of the library smoking your pipe all this time, and you haven't seen anything at all... Hey, be careful! You wouldn't want to slip and fall...."

Kazuya looked over the side of the staircase, and blanched. The bottom floor was so far below that he might as well have been peering into hell. The narrow stairs twisted further in and deeper down like a maze in a nightmare. If someone were to carelessly lose his footing, it would be his first and last time.

Oblivious to Kazuya's concern, Victorique continued down the stairs, her feet almost floating in an unusual gait. As she descended, she addressed Kazuya in a sing-song voice. "That suspicious transfer student came because she had something to do inside the library. And it wasn't to look for you."

“...What do you mean?”

“Look around you. It should be obvious. What is inside a library? What does someone come to do in a library?”

“What’s inside a library? Books, of course? And someone comes to a library ... to read them?”

And maybe also to see you... added Kazuya silently.

At last they had both reached the foot of the staircase. Standing in the atrium at the very bottom, they lifted their eyes to survey the interior of the four-sided building.

Each wall was completely covered in books. Apart from the marble floor and the fresco on the ceiling, every other surface was composed entirely of books, forming a sanctuary of books as far as the eye could see. An aura of dust, the past, and of knowledge glittered as it wafted through the air.

Victorique murmured, “That girl came to hide a tree in the forest.”

Realization dawning on him, Kazuya blurted out, “Oh!”

Victorique smugly nodded as if agreeing with herself. “Right. When she picked the book up from the floor of the crypt, she probably noticed that you saw her. And there was a possibility that someone else may have seen her, too. So she made sure to hide that purple book, which was what she had come here to look for. Where else to hide a book other than a library? After all, the walls are full of them. Locating the one book she had hidden among all the others would equate to looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“No wonder...!”

“Do you want to know her secret? And the secret of that book she hid?”

“Well, of course I do. But there’s no way. No one saw where she hid it....”

Victorique shook her head so firmly he thought it might snap off, then looked up into his eyes.

Those ancient eyes of hers had never before gazed at Kazuya from such close proximity. Guileless curiosity and the pleasure of solving a puzzle caused them to glitter like jewels. In the midst of experiencing a moment of release from a

lifetime of unbearable tedium, her eyes were almost dancing with the simple joy of being alive. Until moments ago, her body resembled an inanimate doll, with a cold and emotionless face submerged under a sea of ennui and aloofness. But now her entire being came to life, as if she had transformed into an entirely different person.

For an instant Kazuya felt that he had brushed against the true nature of this girl, who possessed a keen and wonderful mind that required mysteries as sustenance. He sensed something shining deep inside her, buried alongside interminable weariness and deep despair.

But he instinctively felt that he must never let her know what he had discovered. For this extraordinary girl, like a mythical gilt-winged bird, surely kept it as her carefully guarded secret....

Keeping silent, Kazuya watched her curiously.

“That book, that book, that book!” muttered Victorique to herself, abruptly switching directions. Kazuya scrambled to keep up.

Victorique placed a tiny foot on the first step of the labyrinthine staircase, and called out in a loud voice, “*Un!*” She looked over her shoulder at Kazuya, and beckoned him with her hand. Then, taking another step, she again called out, “*Deux!*”

“...What are you doing?”

Ignoring Kazuya’s confusion, she ascended another step. “*Trois! Quatre! Cinq!*” she continued loudly. Kazuya followed a few paces behind her, regarding her with wonder.

Victorique slowly made her way up the stairs, shouting out a number with each step. “*Onze! Douze! Treize! ...Treize?*”

She turned around. Her eyes were glittering fiercely, the color of blazing emerald. Kazuya had never laid eyes on such a fiery sight. He felt as if he would be scalded by the green glow, which was incandescent and yet chilled him to the bone.

Her eyes sparkled as she asked Kazuya, “Do you remember how they say that an ill fate befalls you if you stand on the thirteenth step? Something about being

dragged into hell?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that story.”

“The students at this school are extremely superstitious. It’s as if the entire student body agreed to walk in lockstep with each other; as if everyone decided to stage a practical joke en masse. When foreigners such as you and that transfer student arrived one day, you couldn’t help but appear out of the ordinary.”

“Yeah, I guess so...”

“Which means there won’t be a single student in this school who would dare set foot upon the thirteenth step of this staircase, right?”

“That’s right.”

“This is likely what that girl was thinking. Even if you hid a book on a random bookshelf in a huge library, there is still a chance it would be discovered by someone accidentally. But the bookshelf located at around eye-level when you stand on the thirteenth step would surely be the only safe place. Therefore...”

Victorique’s face turned jubilant. She gently placed her delicate, childlike hand on the bookshelf, then wrapped it around an eerie-looking book with a purple cover, and slowly withdrew her hand from the shelf.

“Her only choice was to hide that purple book in the bookshelf on the thirteenth stair. Just as the ‘wellspring of wisdom’ told me!”

Dumbfounded, Kazuya looked at the purple book in Victorique’s hand, then back at her. After a few moments, he finally regained his ability to speak, and murmured, “No wonder.”

Victorique nodded, beaming. Her face was suddenly wreathed in an innocent and unclouded smile, like a small child who had just been praised. The unexpected change did not escape Kazuya’s notice, but for now his mind remained occupied with more immediate matters.

That book, that book, that book!

And now they began to pore over that book together, their faces drawing close.

A book dropped at the scene of a murder committed eight years ago. A book discovered and then hidden in the library by Avril, the peculiar transfer student who had come all the way from England in search of something. A book clad in dark purple, imbued with the same sinister darkness that saturated Avril herself....

Kazuya would later come to wonder whether subsequent events would have occurred in the same way had they not discovered the book. The quiet Grey Wolf Victorique would also be entangled in a new case connected to that sinister book, and would end up taking action at Kazuya's side. But that is an entirely different story....

one

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chapter three — the ghost of Millie Marle haunts the abandoned storehouse

[1]

It was a warm, sunny spring afternoon.

St. Marguerite's Library was housed within a stately tower that had been standing since the seventeenth century. Within its central atrium, surrounded by walls covered in huge bookshelves, a narrow labyrinthine staircase rose endlessly

to the ceiling.

Hidden within a mountain valley in the small Western European country of Sauvure was St. Marguerite's School, an august institution dedicated to educating the children of the aristocracy. That library stood deep within the campus, and for hundreds of years, the scent of dust, decay, and knowledge had softly drifted from the distant ceiling to settle upon the floor below, filling the tower with a tranquil atmosphere that no one dared disturb.

The remnants of winter blanketed the spring afternoon in a humid air that was still cool enough to be comfortable.

And for the first time that anyone could remember, the lively voices of a boy and girl rang out in the atrium of the library.

"Her only choice was to hide that purple book in the bookshelf on the thirteenth stair. Just as the 'wellspring of wisdom' told me!"

"No wonder."

"See, here it is."

"Whoa! You're right. That's the book I saw, Victorique. And you actually found it! You're amazing. Even if you are weird."

The impact of a hard object emitted a dull thump.

The small girl, who spoke in a husky voice like that of an old woman, slowly stepped down from the wooden staircase. Someone looking at her would have been reminded of an exquisitely-crafted porcelain doll. Long, splendid blond hair spilled down her back like an unfurled velvet turban, and her green eyes shone with an ominous light. Her tiny, well-proportioned limbs, moving as if she were a doll come to life, were engulfed in as sumptuous a dress as anyone could dream up, which billowed out in countless layers of ladder lace and velvet ribbons.

She gripped the old purple book with one hand.

A small Asian boy alighted the staircase, tears in his eyes as he rubbed the side of his head. His black eyes reflected a gentle, good-natured spirit, but his lips were pulled into a slightly stubborn line. It appeared that the girl—Victorique—had just struck him with the edge of the book.

“That really hurt. I’m telling you, it hurt!”

“...Hmph.” Victorique snorted defiantly at the boy—Kazuya Kujou—and his complaint.

“...You could at least pretend you care.”

“But I don’t. Now, let’s get back to this book.” Victorique opened the book. Then she frowned, realizing that the atrium was too dimly lit for her to read.

From beside her, Kazuya grumbled, “This is the first time I’ve ever been hit by a girl. I strongly object, upon my honor as the third son of an imperial soldier. Women should walk three paces behind men, and not take a second husband*—wait a second, I’m getting mixed up. Hmm, now how did that go again....”

“Shut up.”

“...S-sorry.” Kazuya hung his head. Then he gave up on protesting, or saying anything else for that matter, as he followed the tiny, terrifying Victorique outside through the library’s swing door. They sat down together on the sunlit stone landing.

His mood brightening, Kazuya lifted his bowed head and smiled cheerfully. “Let’s read it, Victorique.”

“...Mmm.” A disgruntled look appeared on her face, but despite her reluctance, she opened the purple book so that he also could see it. Victorique flipped the pages of the book faster and faster, making periodic grunts as she read with remarkable speed.

She was turning the pages too fast for Kazuya to finish them. In an effort to keep up, he placed his head next to hers and peered more closely into the book. This action elicited an annoyed grimace from Victorique. His head was casting a shadow on the pages and making it difficult for her to read.

However, Kazuya was by now fully engrossed in the book, and did not notice the dangerous expression starting to emerge on Victorique’s small face.

The purple book was in fact a manual of witchcraft, detailing the spell that wandering Gypsies used in the Middle Ages to resurrect the dead. Kazuya began to read aloud. “Fourteen dove hearts. Seven owl eyes. Three drams of blood

taken from a human child—how much is a dram again? This is some disturbing stuff.... Oww!” He suddenly clutched at his head, crying out in pain.

Victorique had hit Kazuya’s head with the corner of the book as hard as she could. It made an impressive thud. As he held his head and moaned in agony, she glanced at him and snorted. Then she turned her back to him and started to read rapidly by herself.

Standing up, Kazuya shouted, “What’s wrong with you?! And what is this grudge you have against my head?!”

“Your head was in the way of my reading,” replied Victorique, her tone clipped.

“In the way?! How? Hasn’t it ever crossed your mind that it might be possible to read together with someone in a friendly way?”

Victorique looked up at him, a look of pure wonderment spreading across her face. Then she parted her small, strawberry-red lips, and said, “No?”

“...That’s what I thought.” Kazuya sullenly plopped back down onto the landing.

Suddenly, a loose leaf of paper fluttered out of the purple book.

It was a postcard. The picture on the front was of a street scene that looked vaguely Mediterranean. The addressee was listed as Avril Bradley, and the name of the sender was Sir Bradley.

“That’s Avril’s grandfather. He was a famous explorer from England. Although he ended up disappearing in a hot air balloon over the Atlantic ocean...” Kazuya said, still rubbing his head.

Victorique pointed at the postcard. “There’s a stamp on it, but no postmark.”

Kazuya cocked his head to the side in bemusement. “You’re right.... Then does that mean it was never delivered to Avril? I mean, it was stuck between the pages of this book and left on the floor of the crypt for so long.”

“Perhaps.” Victorique abruptly stood up, carelessly deposited the book into Kazuya’s lap, and walked away without saying a word. She leaned her tiny hands against the heavy doors of the library and pushed them open with all her might, then disappeared into the atrium, still gripping the postcard in one hand.

“...Victorique?”

He received no answer.

“Hey, what happened? Are you done with this book now?”

The door slammed shut.

Victorique’s behavior was far too unpredictable to handle, and Kazuya couldn’t help but feel infuriated. “You’re really too much, Victorique... Wait, where are you?” Just as he was about to mutter another complaint, he opened the door to the library to follow her. But once inside, he stared around in dismay.

“Victorique...? Where did you take off to?”

That mysterious girl, enveloped in lace and frills, had vanished into thin air like a puff of smoke.

Kazuya ran to the foot of the long staircase and looked up.

But there was not a soul to be seen. Moreover, the only other chamber within the atrium was the elevator, but that was reserved only for the use of staff, so she was unlikely to be there either.

“Hey, Victorique... Where are you, you weird, smart, mean little girl...?”

There was only silence.

He stood in place for a minute, reluctant to leave. Then, finally giving up, he trudged away from the library, his eyes downcast....

**Kazuya is conflating two separate proverbs here: “Women should walk three paces behind their master lest they step on his shadow” and “Loyal subjects cannot serve two kings, and chaste women cannot take a second husband.”*

two

[2]

“That Victorique... What’s her problem? She butts heads with me, she flings insults at me, and then she suddenly turns her back on that book and disappears.... What a weird kid. I just can’t figure her out.... I’ve never met a girl like that before.... No, I’ve never even *heard* of girls like that before....”

Grumbling under his breath, Kazuya tucked the book under his arm and walked away from the library.

Just when he thought that he was starting to make friends with that mysterious girl at the top of the library, Victorique... He felt like he had lost sight of her. It was as if he had gotten a little bird to sit in his hand, and then had it suddenly fly away. He felt frustrated, lonely, and thrown off balance all at the same time.

Kazuya remembered that time when he had gone inside the library and saw something flutter down from up above. Victorique had heard him sneezing, and dropped a piece of tissue for him.

“...And I’d hoped we could be friends,” Kazuya whispered, his shoulders slumping.

On his way back to the dormitory, Kazuya took a different gravel path from the one he normally used when walking around campus. When he passed in front of an abandoned building, a thought suddenly occurred to him, and he halted. This place had once been a storehouse, but at some point it had lost its assigned use and was now completely deserted. Left forgotten to the elements, it gave off an eerie feeling.

As Kazuya carefully scrutinized the building, a cold wind whistled past him. Within an instant, the warm sunlight had gone dark. Looking at the sky, he saw grey clouds swiftly amassing to block the sun. A gust of wind whistled by again.

Seized by curiosity, he approached the storehouse. Peering inside, he saw old tables, chairs, and tarnished mirrors jumbled up haphazardly.

He took a step inside, then another....

A hard object slammed into the back of his head. The impact felt infinitely heavier than the blow he had received earlier from a small girl wielding a book. The scene before his eyes turned bright white.

And then he crumpled heavily to the ground....

three

[3]

Kazuya came to on a bed in the infirmary. A woman was seated next to him, applying cool compresses to his head—it was Miss Cécile.

After noticing that Kazuya had regained consciousness, a look of dismay spread across her face. “Oh, Kujou, why were you taking a nap in front of the storehouse?”

“Uh, no, I wasn’t taking a nap there....” Kazuya sat up, rubbing his head. *Someone hit me from behind.... But who could it be, and why? Wait! What if Avril was trying to get that book back, and she was the one...?*

He looked around himself, but the purple book was nowhere in sight. In a panic, he asked, “Miss Cécile, when I was brought here, did I happen to be holding a book with a purple cover?”

She shook her head. “A purple book? No, I didn’t see anything like that.”

“I see.... Also, did anyone see Avril around the area where I had collapsed?”

“Oh, we didn’t just see her. Avril was the one who found you lying on the ground. She ran over to the gardeners to ask for help, and they brought you here.”

Kazuya mulled this over. *If Avril rescued me, then wouldn’t that mean she’s not the one who struck me...?*

As he contemplated the implications, he saw the door to the infirmary slowly open toward the hallway. There was a pale hand grasping the doorknob.

“...Kujou.” Avril hesitantly peeked her head into the room. “Are you ... okay...?”

Kazuya’s eyes met with hers. Then, for some reason, a chill ran down his spine, and he flinched away from her.

Avril was glaring at Kazuya with an odd, decidedly un-girlish expression that he could not quite interpret.

“Gosh, Kujou. What on earth possessed you to take a nap in a place like that?

Did you study so much you forgot to sleep? I don't know what to say to you."

She had suddenly returned to her usual cheerful self.

Bewildered by her change in affect, Kazuya stayed silent. *It's probably strange of me to suspect her.... But Avril is the one who found that purple book and then hid it away, and she might be the one who attacked me while I was carrying it, too.... Nah, I'm probably overthinking it. There's no way she could do something like that....*

Avril smiled unconcernedly, oblivious to Kazuya's inner dilemma. "Say, did you know that the storehouse where you passed out is famous among the students here?"

"...No."

"They say that the ghost of a dead student—"

Before Avril could finish her sentence, Miss Cécile abruptly cried out, "Eek!" and began to babble, "Um, I need to go write the next exam! Oh, yes, I have to water the flowerpots!" as she fled the room. The door closed after her with a bang, and the sound of her running footsteps faded away into the distance. Kazuya and Avril stared at the door in stunned silence.

Avril recovered first. "They say the ghost of one of the girl students haunts the storehouse, and that the stairs to the basement are actually a portal into hell. If the ghost beckons you down the stairs, you die."

Kazuya knitted his brows. "...Is the name of that student Millie Marle, by any chance?"

"It could be. But isn't it kind of disrespectful to spread rumors about an actual dead person just for sport? Well, I can't stand ghost stories, myself," Avril said in a low voice, her face solemn.

Kazuya remembered seeing that look on her face before—it looked far too adult, not at all suited to the face of a fifteen year old girl. He started to wonder whether Avril really was the same age as he.

Seeing Kazuya about to stand up from the bed, Avril lent him her hand. As she did so, she continued, "Apparently, there's also a ghost story about the library."

“...The library?” Kazuya repeated, startled.

“Yeah. They say, ‘a golden fairy inhabits the top of the library’. That fairy knows all the mysteries of the world, but when people go ask for her help, she demands their souls in exchange.... I think she sounds more like a devil than a fairy, doesn’t she?”

Kazuya shook his head. “If you’re talking about the top of the library, there aren’t any fairies or devils there, just Victorique.”

“Victorique...?”

“Yeah. Remember how there’s that empty seat in our classroom? The one by the window. That’s Victorique’s seat. She always skips class and holes herself up in the library. So, there’s no golden fairy at the top of the library, just a golden-haired girl, and what she demands isn’t souls, just exotic foreign sweets.”

“Hmm...” Avril’s eyes glittered with interest, and she nodded several times as if thinking to herself.

Kazuya bid Avril goodbye, and began to walk down the hallway. At the far end, he saw a pointed golden head advancing in his direction. It belonged to Inspector Gréville de Blois. Accompanying him were his two deputies, wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps and holding hands.

As soon as he caught sight of Kazuya, he struck a pose, and said, “Why, hello there, Kujou! Um, well, I suppose you haven’t seen it either....”

“Seen what?”

“Just a little something I’ve lost. No, never mind, forget it....” The inspector looked as if he wanted to ask something, but instead chose to change the subject. “You see, I’m very busy. Just as I solved the case of the mummified knight, another case came along to run me ragged. Perhaps you’ve heard of a man known as Cuiaran?”

“...Nope, can’t say I have.”

“Cuiaran was a famous thief who plundered all over Europe. No one has ever seen him, and no one knows his real name. He’s been keeping a low profile for

the past seven or eight years. Some say that he may have already retired, and is now living the high life who knows where. And then some think he may have died in an accident or something to that effect....”

The inspector paused, then resumed speaking briskly.

“At any rate, Kujou. Lately, the capital of Sauvure, Sauvrière, has been in a bit of an uproar over the appearance of a thief calling himself the second Cuïaran. Although he seems to be pretty young. So, according to a report from Sauvure police headquarters, they received word that this second Cuïaran is apparently heading toward this village for reasons unknown. Apparently, there was someone who saw him get on a train, although I don’t know many details other than that.... Anyway, Kujou. What do you think a famous thief would possibly want to do with a village like this? It’s not as if there’s anything valuable here. All we have are vineyards and apple orchards, and other than that, there’s just this mysterious St. Marguerite’s School of ours...” Inspector de Blois tilted his head to one side, baffled. “It’s beyond me....”

“It isn’t as if I would know either. Although, if you were to ask Victorique, I’m sure she could come up with the answer in no time...”

The inspector pretended not to hear that.

Kazuya glared at him.

And then he wondered to himself what exactly the relationship was between this eccentric aristocrat of a detective, and the extraordinarily strange girl at the top of the library.

Inspector de Blois was in charge of investigating both cases that Kazuya had been dragged into: first, the motorbike decapitation case, and then the mummified knight case. In both instances, he had solved the mysteries quite handily with Victorique’s help. But although the inspector knew Victorique’s location and the brilliance of her mind, and relied on her help, he seemed to have sworn never to speak to her directly.

On the other hand, one could say that it was Victorique who despised the inspector and treated him as if he didn’t exist....

What was one supposed to call this sort of relationship? And why did they

seem to hate each other so?

The inspector suddenly spoke again as if remembering something. “Now that I think of it, Kujou. I found out something about the perpetrator of the mummified knight case, Millie Marle. That teacher of yours, Cécile or whatever her name was, used to be a student at this school.”

“Okay...”

“Are you paying attention? Cécile was a student here eight years ago. You know what that means, right? Cécile and Millie Marle used to be classmates.”

Kazuya widened his eyes in surprise.

After all, when they had entered the crypt and discovered the body, Miss Cécile never even alluded to that fact....

“I ran into her earlier when she left the infirmary, and told her about Millie Marle being the killer. It seemed to be a great shock to her.” The inspector pointed at the flower garden behind the building. “After that, I saw her wander over there. She looked like she was crying.”

Then the inspector walked away, his two deputies following him down the hallway....

four

[4]

As Kazuya brooded over what he should say to her, he headed toward the garden behind the main campus building. There he found Miss Cécile next to the flower beds. She was crouched down and poking at the ground with a stick in her hand, sighing disconsolately.

Kazuya was still not quite sure of how best to approach her, but before he could ask her about the case, the sight of something tucked under her arm caught his eye. To his surprise, it was the purple book he had lost.

“Miss Cécile, that book...?!”

His teacher heard his voice and stood up.

“How did you get that book?!”

She blinked in surprise. “Oh, you mean this? I found it on the ground behind the flowers. Is this yours, then?”

“Y-yes, it is....”

“You shouldn’t treat your books like that. But what kind of book is this, anyway?”

She left unsaid the question of what he could possibly be doing with a book about resurrecting the dead. Kazuya grasped her meaning nonetheless, and mumbled a perfunctory excuse while thinking to himself, *It was on the ground behind the flowers...? Why would that happen? After Avril hid that book and it was retrieved, someone attacked me and knocked me out while I was carrying it. But if this book is so valuable, why would it end up getting tossed in a flower bed...?*

The memory of Victorique suddenly losing interest in the book and walking away just as she had begun to read it so feverishly, was also starting to gnaw at him. *What’s the meaning of all this...?*

Kazuya put his face in his hands. The sight of his distress elicited a puzzled look

from Miss Cécile.

He recovered his composure, and asked, “By the way, Miss Cécile. Inspector de Blois told me something a little while ago....”

“Oh, really? What did he say?”

“Um, well, he said that you used to be classmates with Miss Millie Marle.”

Miss Cécile gave a start. “...Yes, that’s right.”

“Were you friends with her?”

“Yes, I was. So this is all quite shocking to me....” A cloud passed over her face.

Moments later, Kazuya and Miss Cécile left the flower garden, and started walking slowly through the expansive, park-like school grounds.

Miss Cécile knitted her brows. “The truth is that I never wanted to go to the crypt by myself in the first place. I knew Millie was resting there, and that made me sad. That’s why I asked you and Miss Avril to come with me.”

“I see....”

“But then all this happened.... I couldn’t imagine Millie actually killing someone....”

Without intending it, they had ended up in front of the storehouse where Kazuya had been attacked. He pointed at the building, and said, “That was where I collapsed.”

Miss Cécile looked scandalized. “Oh, Kujou, why did you fall asleep in a place like this? Why would you do that?”

“No, I didn’t quite fall asleep....” Kazuya took a careful step toward the storehouse. “Avril said that the rest of the students make sure to stay away from here. It seems that they like to tell a ghost story about the ghost of a dead girl—Millie Marle. They say she haunts this area, and tries to drag people into hell.”

“My goodness!” Miss Cécile looked appalled, and more than slightly frightened, as she gripped Kazuya’s arm with both hands and peered into the storehouse.

Dust had accumulated on every surface in the room. Old tables and chairs were heaped into tall piles, and near the back, a decaying spiral staircase led to the basement. Rays of sunlight infiltrated into the darkness through the partly opened door, and sparkled upon white specks of dust dancing in the air.

But then...

From the back of the room—no, from the direction of the basement, Kazuya and Miss Cécile thought they could detect the sound of a faint, keening wail.

They exchanged a look.

Then they strained to listen again. But this time they heard nothing but silence.

“Miss Cécile, just now, I thought I heard something that sounded like a voice....” Kazuya turned to her, but was startled to see the look on her face.

Behind her large, round glasses, tears were pooling in her droopy, puppy-like eyes. Her shoulders trembled violently.

Then she said, “I’m scared!”

“...Huh?”

“I’m scared! I’m angry with you, Kujou!”

“At, at me? Why?!”

“Because I’m scared!”

Apparently, Miss Cécile was prone to fright. Kazuya was reminded of the time earlier in the infirmary, when she suddenly began to blurt out excuses to leave the room the moment Avril had mentioned ghosts....

Now having shed her previous guise as a kind and caring teacher, she poked a finger at Kazuya accusingly, and pushed him into the storehouse.

A chilly wind blew past them, caressing their cheeks.

Once inside, they heard a loud noise out of nowhere. Quaking in fear, Miss Cécile clung to Kazuya’s back. “Let me know if anything happens, okay? I’m taking off my glasses! Then I won’t be able to see anything, whether ghosts or anything else!”

Kazuya turned around and saw that she had in fact taken off her glasses, and

was now looking up at him with an unfocused gaze. Her brown eyes, looking much larger than they usually did while she was wearing glasses, darted about nervously.

She then tripped over a wooden box on the floor, and let loose a shriek that resembled the cry of a small child. Kazuya said exasperatedly, “Miss Cécile, it’s not safe without your glasses; please put them back on.”

She clucked her tongue in chagrin, then put on her glasses.

But the next moment...

Save ... me....

They heard a soft voice. Kazuya and Miss Cécile turned to each other, and shook their heads to confirm that it didn’t belong to either of them.

Save ... me!

It was the voice of a young girl.

In the dim light of the storehouse, the pale upper body of a girl seemed to materialize in front of them. Blond hair, large blue eyes, and a long, straight nose adorned her lovely face. But her skin was unnaturally pallid, and her cheeks were sunken.

Miss Cécile screamed, “A ghost just appeared?!”

And then, with a peculiar slithering sound, the girl vanished.

Miss Cécile screamed again. “A ghost just disappeared?!”

Then she removed her glasses again with her trembling hands, and with an oddly stubborn look on her face, handed them to Kazuya. “Now I won’t be able to see anything ever again!” she cried out as she grabbed his arm and yanked him toward the exit. Then she stumbled outside, screaming, “N-o-o!”

“M-Miss Cécile...?!”

Miss Cécile fled as fast as she could, screaming all the while. However, due to the shortness of her legs, in the end she could manage no more than a slow trot, and Kazuya needed only to slightly hasten his normal walking speed in order to

catch up with her.

“Miss Cécile, your glasses, your glasses!”

After leaving the storehouse safely in the distance, Miss Cécile finally slowed to a halt. She took her glasses from Kazuya’s hands and arranged them neatly on her face, then said in a very firm voice, “...Kujou, you’d best not tell any of the other students about what just happened. I’ll give you a failing mark if you do!”

“I’m not going to tell! And I never fail my classes. But more importantly... What on earth was that just now?”

Miss Cécile shut her eyes tightly. “A g-g-g-ghost?”

“...Miss Cécile, there is no such thing as ghosts.”

“But it wasn’t Millie Marle either.”

“...Oh?”

She reopened her brown eyes. “It was a ghost, but not Millie’s ghost. It didn’t look anything like her. That wasn’t the face of anyone I’ve ever seen at this school.”

Their eyes met in bewilderment.

“...Then whose ghost is it?”

A cold wind seeped in between their bodies as they stood frozen in place....

five

[5]

Meanwhile, in St. Marguerite's Library...

"And there's supposedly a girl who comes here...?" Avril stood looking up from the bottom floor of the atrium in the strange square-shaped tower, rich with the scent of dust, decay, and knowledge.

"No girl would want to spend her time in a place like this. Maybe just old men would like it here. Or maybe ... ghosts." She giggled at her own words. "It's certainly a cozy place for a ghost. Millie Marle should come haunt this library, not that musty old storehouse." The thought prompted Avril to throw her head back in laughter.

Then she suddenly stopped laughing, her face assuming a look of concentration as she began to climb the narrow wooden staircase. As she ascended higher and higher through the maze of stairs, her lively, nimble footsteps echoed through the tower, at odds with the gloomy atmosphere. The enormous bookshelves that wrapped around the walls of the library rattled in time with the vibration of each footfall.

About ten minutes later...

Avril had started running up the steps with boundless energy, but the labyrinthine stairs were far longer than she anticipated, seeming to go on forever. After several minutes, her stamina had reached its limit. She climbed the last few flights with her hands on her hips, almost crawling up the stairs as she doubled over, panting.

"And Kujou ... climbs up these ... these monstrous stairs, like they're nothing... I can't imagine what he's thinking...."

Avril took a quick glance over the side of the staircase, and found the floor of the atrium so far below her that she felt dizzy just from the sight of it. She tried to trace the maze of stairs from bottom to top, but it seemed to stretch

endlessly upward, like the writhing torso of an unearthly creature, before she could finally locate the step upon which she stood.

She felt a shudder run through her body. The labyrinthine stairs looked as if they were about to start moving any second, grabbing hold of her like something out of a nightmare....

“...This place is giving me the creeps,” Avril whispered to herself.

She dashed up the stairs as fast as she could, at last setting foot upon the white floor at the very top of the staircase. And then she cried out in surprise, for there she found...

...a garden.

Tropical trees and garishly-colored flowers bedecked the lush, green conservatory. Sunlight peeked out furtively from rectangular skylights.

Avril took stock of her surroundings. “But there’s no one...” She raised her voice in incredulity. “Is no one here...?”

There was not a soul in sight.

Avril scanned the vicinity, losing count of how many times she swiveled her eyes back and forth.

Between the conservatory and the staircase, there was a small, dimly lit space about the size of a closet. An antique-looking glass lamp, stacks of heavy books, and an old ceramic pipe lay scattered on the floor.

Avril inspected the area, frowning.

Everything was covered in a layer of dust. She felt as if she could almost see time and stillness themselves blanketing the floor in the form of white dust. It was a desolate place.

“There’s no one here,” Avril murmured again. “If there was anyone, it’d be a ghost.” Trying to squelch her fear, she deliberately called out in a loud voice, “Hey, ghost!”

She hesitantly began creeping forward, step by step, her eyes nervously

darting to and fro. But just as she was about to enter the conservatory...

“Eek...!?” Avril emitted a brief shriek, this time in genuine fear.

Then her tense expression slowly relaxed into a smile of relief.

What she saw was an elegant porcelain doll, casually placed against the railing.

...It somehow looked very lonely.

The doll was much smaller than life size, but looked much heavier and sturdier than most dolls. It wore a dress made of Gobelins tapestry, and upon the small head, a crocheted lace bonnet veiled long, flowing blond hair.

Its eyes were wide open, frozen and unblinking.

Avril suddenly broke into a smile. She reached out to the doll and gently lifted it, then hugged it tightly. After peering closely at the porcelain doll's exquisite face, and seeing the way each individual strand of its long eyelashes had been painstakingly applied, she exclaimed, “Why, how adorable!”

Noticing how much dust had accumulated upon its elaborate clothing and headdress, Avril realized that the doll must have been placed there a very long time ago. She sat the doll upon the floor and carefully brushed off the dust, then began talking to herself absentmindedly. “This must be a very expensive doll. It might even be...”

Her face suddenly changed into a cold and strangely mature expression, one that belied the guise of the cheerful young girl whom Kazuya and Miss Cécile knew.

“This doll must've been designed by Grafenstein, that brilliant 19th century dollmaker from Germany. Look, there's even his signature here.”

Avril gently lifted up the doll's long blond hair, exposing the mark of a decorative letter G on the back of its neck. Then she nodded in satisfaction. “They say he made a deal with the devil so that he could put souls in the dolls he created. Those dolls were possessed by evil spirits and went roaming about at nighttime. His handiwork ought to fetch a pretty penny.... Well, well, what do you know! I came all the way to these mountains in the middle of nowhere to look for Sir Bradley's secret family heirloom, and now I've stumbled across this

marvelous find. Only the second Cuianan could pull something like this off! All right, maybe I'm getting a little ahead of myself here. At least I seem to be well on my way to becoming a fine thief, maybe even one who could measure up to the likes of the first Cuianan. Now, little lady, why don't we..."

Now Avril unceremoniously picked up the doll and looked around for a place to hide it. She spotted a small chest, and was just about to open it when a sudden thought gave her pause. Then she decided to hide the doll behind the chest instead.

"If I carry the doll out of the library, someone might see me. After all, I thought I hid that purple book so carefully, but it didn't take long for someone to snatch it out from under me. And I'd spent so much time looking for it, too. So, someone was definitely watching me. I'll see if I can track that down again, but for now I'll take this—oh, I know. I'll bring my satchel here and use that to carry it away. It's not like anyone will notice a doll going missing from this dusty old place anyway. This is truly, honestly, a marvelous find." Avril stood up, nodding contentedly.

All of a sudden, a thought occurred to her, and she frowned. "Wait a sec.... I remember when Kujou told me about this place, he mentioned that a girl named Victorique spends her time here. But so far I haven't seen anyone like that...." A mystified expression crossed her face.

Avril sized up her surroundings.

There was an old pipe.

A mountain of thick, heavy books.

A lamp.

...All of these began to take on a surreal feeling, as if they had been already sitting there for hundreds of years, suspended in a dreamlike silence.

Gathering up her bravado, Avril said jokingly to the doll, "Hey, little lady, surely you aren't the girl Kujou was talking about, are you? That can't possibly be true, right?"

Naturally, a porcelain doll could not reply. Its large eyes, frozen wide open, stared at her vacantly.

“That can’t be it....”

There was no one to respond to her.

Then, suddenly, Avril felt a chill run through her body.

““The golden fairy inhabits the top of the library’” she whispered to herself, as if remembering something.

Avril turned to the chest where she had hidden the golden-haired doll, and said in a ghoulish tone, ““The fairy demands souls in exchange for her assistance’”

She thought she sensed something, and drew back.

“A doll created by Grafenstein, with a soul granted to it by the devil!”

A cool wind blew in from the skylights.

“Don’t tell me that you’ve bewitched Kujou in order to steal his soul...?”

The pale, sculpted lips of the doll seemed to form a whisper....

Avril shrieked, then stumbled backwards until she reached the landing of the stairs, nearly losing her balance and falling down the steps. She gave a worldly click of her tongue that didn’t suit her lovely face in the least, and cried out in a quavering voice, “Tch! You’ve got to be kidding me! There’s no way that could happen!”

Avril proceeded to run down the maze-like stairs in such a hurry that she nearly tripped over her own feet....

six

[6]

At the same time as Avril was fleeing the library, Kazuya was rushing to return to it. After comforting a distressed Miss Cécile, he stopped by the dormitory, gathered together some exotic sweets to take with him, and took off running again.

Just as he was about to walk into the atrium of the library, he bumped hard into someone who happened to be making a hasty exit at the same time. “Whoa!”

The person he had bumped into turned out to be Avril, panting raggedly. “K-Kujou...”

“Avril, what’s wrong?”

“I, uh, went to that conservatory that you told me about....”

“You climbed all the way to the top? Exhausting, isn’t it? So ... what on earth’s the matter, then?”

Avril looked as if she had something to say, but she remained silent. At last she shook her head and said, “Nothing. Nothing at all...” and hurriedly exited the library.

“What’s gotten into her, I wonder?” Kazuya scratched his head at her reaction, but decided against following her, and went ahead into the library.

The library was cloaked in its usual stillness. It was a tranquility with a certain air of slight dustiness.

As Kazuya gazed up at the labyrinthine staircase, tracing its length all the way to the ceiling, a faint melancholy clouded his eyes. Then he gathered up his courage and nodded determinedly to himself, and began to ascend the stairs with loud, firm footsteps.

But the staircase was ever so long.

He continued climbing.

And climbing.

...And climbing still higher.

Kazuya lost all sense of time. He was seized with the feeling that he had been placed under an evil spell, and was merely passing the same point over and over again. When he accidentally looked over the side of the staircase, he felt his head spin from the tremendous height, and was forced to pause for a moment.

Suddenly, Kazuya spotted something small and golden move near the top of his field of vision. He stopped climbing and looked up, squinting his eyes. "Victorique?"

"...I suppose you've brought some sweets for me." The faint sound of her husky voice echoed from far above.

A look of exasperation crossed Kazuya's face. "I do. It's called [*karintou*](#). It might be a bit hard to chew, but I don't want to hear any complaints."

"...Hmph." Her small head withdrew from sight. A half-second later, her long blond hair languidly followed in her wake, undulating then disappearing, like the tail of some ethereal creature of myth....

At last, Kazuya finished climbing all the way to the top of the library. Between gasps for air, he asked, "I ran into Avril just as I was arriving, and she mentioned something about visiting the conservatory. Did you see her?"

Victorique pretended not to hear him.

"Well?"

"...Dunno," she answered curtly.

"Does that mean you didn't see her? That's odd."

Victorique plucked a single piece of karintou from the bag he was holding, and eyed it suspiciously. She looked it up and down and side to side, then held it close to her small nose and took a sniff. "It smells sweet!"

Kazuya took a quick peek at Victorique's expression, and saw a smile slowly

spreading across her face—perhaps she was pleased with his choice of sweets, he thought, his mood brightening. “Of course it does. It’s candy, after all.”

“But it looks like dog poop.”

“...Girls shouldn’t say such things.”

Victorique parted her small lips, and popped the karintou into her mouth. Then she grimaced. “It’s hard!”

“I guess you don’t like hard things, then. You threw away the kaminari-okoshi because it was too hard for you back then, too. Oh, Victorique, you’re just like a little old granny. ...Ouch!”

She had kicked his shin with the pointed toe of her boot. As he keeled over in agony, from the corner of his eye he observed Victorique extending her hand for a second helping, as if she’d found the karintou to her liking. The sight of this filled him with relief.

“...Ow, ow, ow. Anyway, Victorique. Let’s go on with the other thing I came to talk about.” Kazuya began to breathlessly retell the latest events. “I saw Inspector de Blois again a little while ago. Apparently, he’s searching for a copycat of some famous thief called Cuiaran, but no one seems to know for sure what he looks like or who he is. So—”

“I already know about Cuiaran,” interrupted Victorique diffidently.

Kazuya gave a start. “What do you know about him?”

“What he looks like and who he is.”

“....”

“It’s that girl Avril; she’s the second Cuiaran. She was just here earlier proclaiming that for all the world to hear. Made for quite the moronic sight.”

With this, Victorique seemed to lose interest in the discussion. Placing her book back on her lap, she once again began to read with remarkable speed, finishing each page in the blink of an eye.

The piece of karintou in Kazuya’s hand fell to the ground with a plop.

Victorique looked up at him. “What’s wrong? Standing right there with your

mouth wide open like a fool. Don't blame me if a fly goes inside."

"Avril is Cuiaran?!"

"Didn't I just say so?"

"...Really?"

"Why should I lie?"

Victorique returned to reading and nibbling on pieces of karintou, while pointedly ignoring Kazuya.

Then Kazuya shrieked, "Nooo!"

"Shut up, Kujou!" Flying into a rage, she grabbed pieces of candy with her small hand and threw them at Kazuya. "Be quiet! You're interrupting my reading!"

"Nooo! ...Wait, how is that possible?"

"How should I know?"

Victorique smoked her pipe unconcernedly for a few moments. Then she suddenly turned to look at him, a resolute smile on her lips. "Isn't there something you want to ask me?"

"...What would that be?"

"About the truth I reconstructed by means of my wellspring of wisdom, while amusing myself with fragments of chaos in order to pass the time?"

Kazuya leaned forward. "Are you saying you solved the mystery? But what else do you know about this case?"

"I know who the first Cuiaran was."

"Huh?" Kazuya stared at her in amazement. "Is it ... someone we know? Really? Come on, tell me, tell me!"

Victorique opened her green eyes. They flickered with a cold fire—an uncanny flame, the likes of which Kazuya had never seen before, filled with fearlessness, and a deep sorrow....

"It happened something like this."

And then Victorique uttered a certain name...

The great thief Cuian came to St. Marguerite's School, and a certain mysterious transfer student followed in his footsteps as the second Cuian.

Her target: an enigmatic purple book, in which was written the dark rite for reviving the dead....

The foreign student from the Orient, Kazuya Kujou, was dragged into the case along with his guardian angel—or was she an evil spirit, come to take his soul?—the mysterious girl Victorique, who delighted in the exercise of her own wonderful mind.

The adventure of Victorique, Kazuya, and the purple book would later come to an unexpected conclusion. But that is an entirely different story.....

one

chapter four — a golden fairy inhabits the top of the library

[1]

On a quiet evening in springtime, in St. Marguerite's Library...

The passage of many years was etched into the stone-hewn walls of this enormous repository of books, unrivaled in Western Europe. Beyond the leather-covered swing door, hammered through with round brass tacks, row after row of bookshelves encircled the central atrium. A feeling of absolute reverence permeated this space, as if wisdom, time, and stillness themselves had silently fallen upon the ground like a layer of heavy snow.

This was a sanctuary of knowledge hidden deep within the grounds of St. Marguerite's School, a distinguished institution nestled among the mountains of the small European country of Sauvure. For every day of the past three hundred years, it sat in cultivation of wondrous repose ... until now.

"Are you serious?! Maxim is Cuiaran?!"

Far away at the top of that quiet library, just underneath the solemn religious fresco painted on the ceiling, resounded the piercing shout of a boy overcome with surprise. The countless books stacked along the walls, roused from their long sleep, seemed to slowly blink open their wrinkled eyes and gaze up at the ceiling as the queer noise ricocheted around the tower.

A narrow wooden staircase constructed in the form of an enormous labyrinth snaked precariously upward from the atrium below. Close to the distant ceiling above was a verdant conservatory, overgrown with tropical vegetation and enticing flowers in full bloom. The boy's voice seemed to be coming from somewhere around this conservatory, but...

"...Be quiet, Kujou!"

"B-but how is that possible?"

“How should I know?”

Alongside the innocent voice of the young boy, another voice rang out. It sounded husky, almost like that of an old woman, and yet was also strangely sonorous. That voice seemed to be savagely rebuffing the young boy. From the boy’s direction came the response of an “Oh...” and a “Hmm...?” followed by a groan, until at last silence filled the library once more.

There in the conservatory, an Asian boy of small build and warm countenance sat on the floor holding his knees. In front of him was a tiny, exquisite doll.

The doll, in the form of a girl, was constructed at nearly life size at around one hundred and forty centimeters. A lavishly cumbersome dress swallowed her body up in billowing layers of white ladder lace and pink velvet ribbons. Her magnificent long blond hair spilled down to the floor like a velvet turban come undone. And her cool green eyes, set within her small, astonishingly well-proportioned face, radiated a venom that was nearly breathtaking in its coldness.

Heavy books lay open on the doll’s lap, and yet more opened books sat scattered about her in all directions, spiraling around her small body like a ritualistic circle invoking some dark magic.

She took a puff from a ceramic pipe that she clenched in the delicate fingers of her pale hand, as a thin white strand of smoke lazily drifted toward the skylights....

“I was really shocked when you said that Avril is the second Cuiaran.... But why do you think Maxim was the first one?”

In response to Kazuya’s question, the doll Victorique—no, the girl, though she may have been petite enough and beautiful enough, not to mention impassive enough to be mistaken for a doll—gave her answer, albeit an impatiently stated one.

“The first Cuiaran disappeared all of a sudden seven or eight years ago. Maxim came back to the school every spring, but in the spring of eight years ago, was killed. And when Maxim’s body was discovered, only then did the second Cuiaran

appear.... Can you honestly call this mere coincidence?”

“B-but still...”

“Most likely, each time Maxim, no, the first Cuiaran returned to the school, he hid his loot somewhere on campus, the same way a pirate hides his booty in a cave. The purple book was among these. But before he was able to hide it, he was locked along with it inside the crypt. Well, that’s what I think, at least.”

Victorique said no more, and once again retreated to her books, which she began to read at an astonishing speed. As soon as she turned a page, she had already finished reading it and was ready to flip to the next one. She would occasionally interrupt this routine by bringing her pipe to her lips and taking a puff from it.

Kazuya stared at her intently as she did this.

Then Victorique suddenly dropped her book onto the floor, opened her green eyes wide, and stared blankly into space.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

“...I’m bored!”

“I’m sorry?”

“I read and I read, and I’m still bored! Hey, you foolish-looking man over there—um, I believe your name was Kujou—do something to surprise me.”

“Wh-who are you calling foolish?! Besides, I wouldn’t be able to think of anything....”

“For example...” Her face turned serious, and she got up and strode over to him, stopping uncomfortably close. Kazuya shrank away from her—he was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

“Why don’t you stick your head between your legs and give me a big grin, while balancing a pole on your belly with a plate spinning on it?”

“...I can’t do something like that!”

“Why not? You’re Oriental, aren’t you?”

“Th-th-that, that’s prejudiced!”

Kazuya leapt to his feet, now feeling genuinely angry. He knew that Victorique was a member of the aristocracy in Sauvure, a country known as “the little giant of Western Europe.” But he was still the third son of an imperial soldier, and he was determined to strongly object against such affronts. His expression hardening, he said, “Now look here, Victorique—”

“...Hold on. What did that ghost say to you when you were in the storehouse with Cécile?”

This punctured Kazuya’s momentary bravado, and he had to give up on what he had planned to say. “...Um, I believe it was, ‘save me’.”

“That’s serious, then. Perhaps you should go save her.”

“Save the ghost?”

“You’re a slow one, aren’t you?”

Once again, Kazuya boiled over with rage. But Victorique merely parted her glossy, cherry-red lips unconcernedly, and said, “That’s not a ghost in the storehouse. That’s a girl. I think you said she had short blond hair and blue eyes? Now that’s really serious!”

“Wh-why?”

“Gréville is still on campus, right? If he is, then go take him to the storehouse with you. You wouldn’t know it from his funny hairstyle, but he still has police authority. Now, authority and the like may be nothing more than the excreta of civilization, but sometimes such things do come in handy.”

Kazuya was bewildered. “I don’t really mind.... But what do you want us to do there?”

Victorique opened her small hands and flapped them in an expression of disapproval. Then she said, with a look of dismay, “Do you still not understand? You are going to rescue that girl you saw with short blond hair and blue eyes. She is being held captive.”

“...Who is she?”

“That’s Avril Bradley. Now go immediately; there’s no time to waste. We’ll have to postpone sticking your head between your legs for another occasion. Go

at once.”

Kazuya descended the stairs, shaking his head to himself. He was still completely in the dark when it came to following Victorique’s train of thought.

“...Huh?”

Now the very topic of the previous discussion appeared herself, running quickly up the maze of stairs. For some reason, she was holding a large suitcase in one hand, but judging from how easily she carried it, it seemed to be completely empty.

“Avril...”

She looked up at the sound of his voice.

“What happened? What’s that suitcase for?”

“I found a doll made by the famous dollmaker Grafenstein—wait, you know what, never mind. I’m in a hurry here. ...S-so what are you doing here, Kujou?”

Kazuya carefully stepped around Avril as they passed the same point on the narrow staircase. “I was chatting with Victorique. Now she’s kind of ordered me to go do something for her, you see....”

“...Victorique?” Avril watched Kazuya hurry down the stairs, a mystified look entering her eyes. “Kujou...” she whispered softly. “I wonder if he was being serious...? It’s not like there’s an actual human girl in the conservatory. There’s only that doll... The one with the evil spirit sealed inside of it, after that dollmaker made a deal with the devil. Is Kujou actually taking orders from it? What’s going on...?”

Shaking her head, Avril once again began to climb the labyrinthine stairs, empty suitcase in hand.

two

[2]

Kazuya left the library and began running across campus in search of Inspector de Blois. Along the way, he ran into several teachers, and to each one he described the inspector's peculiar hairstyle—his blond hair hardened and twisted into a point, like the tip of a drill. One teacher told him, "If you're talking about that odd-looking man, he went that way."

Kazuya set off running in the direction to which she pointed.

Soon enough, he located the inspector. The vibrant rays of the setting sun, fast approaching nightfall, glistened upon his golden drill. Kazuya explained to him that Victorique had instructed him to go to the storehouse, although he wasn't exactly sure why.

Inspector de Blois frowned. "I'm not familiar with this 'Victorique' of whom you speak, but I'm willing to go take a look."

"Inspector!"

"...Don't make such a terrifying face, Kujou," the inspector said, hurriedly moving in front of Kazuya as the two of them continued to head toward the storehouse.

Inside the damp and gloomy storehouse, dusty tables, chairs, and tarnished mirrors were strewn about in disarray.

The inspector took a timid step inside. "Kujou, from what I understand, this place is haunted, is it not?"

"Yes. By the ghost of Millie Marle. At least according to rumor."

"Then you and that Cécile woman saw something, too?"

"...Are you implying that you're scared?"

Inspector de Blois swung his head over his shoulder. The tip of his drill nearly stabbed Kazuya's forehead, forcing him to hastily duck.

“I’m not scared!”

“...But Miss Cécile said that the ghost we saw wasn’t Millie. She looked like someone else.”

“Then who was it?”

“Beats me. It’s just that, when I told Victorique about it, she said it was Avril Bradley, and that I’m supposed to go rescue her. But I didn’t know what she meant. I mean, Avril is alive and well; I even just bumped into her on the staircase of the library earlier....”

“Hmm...”

They exchanged a look, simultaneously cocking their heads in bafflement.

“Even I, great inspector that I am, have no idea.”

“No surprise there.”

“...Hmph!”

After a moment of exchanging glares with each other, they went back to making their hesitant entry into the storehouse.

At the very back of the room...

Someone was lying on the floor.

The inspector uttered a short screech. Kazuya rushed to his side, then realized that on the floor was a girl about the same age as he. “Are you...?!”

Her eyes were closed.

The ghost we saw earlier must actually be this girl. I had a feeling that it wasn’t a ghost, but a person....

Helping her up, Kazuya peered into her face, then gasped.

She’s really cute!

The girl’s facial features were finely proportioned, with a straight nose and a mature air to her face, which was framed by short blond hair. Long athletic limbs extended from the simple white dress that clothed her lithe and slim body, reminiscent of a young doe. But her skin and clothes were soiled, her hands and

feet were bound, and a partially unwound gag was wrapped around her mouth.

“Can you hear me?!” Kazuya quickly removed the gag from her mouth and untied her limbs. As he gazed into her face, her eyes suddenly opened.

...Her eyes were blue and limpid, like the sky on a clear summer’s day.

Tears immediately welled up and spilled from their corners. She reached toward Kazuya and clung to him. “Save me!”

“You’re saved! It’s going to be all right now. There’s a policeman here, too. But ... who are you? Why are you being held prisoner in a place like this? Who did this to you?”

The face of the girl with the large blue eyes contorted in fear. “I’m the real Avril Bradley!” she cried out.

Kazuya gasped. “You’re the real Avril...?”

“Yes!”

“Then, that other Avril is a fake....”

Kazuya remembered the unease he sometimes felt around the other Avril. While she usually behaved like any innocent and cheerful young girl, sometimes her demeanor would abruptly shift, turning very cold. Moreover, there were occasions when he thought she looked much older than she should have been.

He guessed that those times when she acted innocently and cheerfully were in imitation of the real Avril...

And Victorique had said that this impostor of Avril was also the second Cuiaran.

“...Hold on a minute. That would mean...” Kazuya jumped up, remembering where the fake Avril—the second Cuiaran—was this very moment.

“At the library! V-Victorique!?”

“What’s wrong?”

Kazuya handed Avril to the inspector, then dashed out of the storehouse. The inspector called after him in alarm. “Kujou?!”

“The second Cuiaran went to the library. I don’t know what she’s trying to do...

But that's where Victorique is! A little girl, all by herself..."

Kazuya ran down the gravel path.

three

[3]

At that very moment, Avril Bradley—no, the girl who was the second Cuiaran—was running up the labyrinthine staircase in the library, empty suitcase in hand, panting raggedly. But no matter how high she climbed, the top floor felt farther than ever.

At last, she reached the top of the staircase, and leaned against the thin handrail incised with a leaf motif, her shoulders rising and falling as she wheezed for air.

“Wh-where’s that doll...?”

Cuiaran stumbled around the conservatory in search of the gorgeously-clothed porcelain doll that she had hidden behind a small chest. Once she realized that it was nowhere to be found, she gulped.

She set down the suitcase and scanned the vicinity.

She searched.

And searched some more.

And kept searching...

“...H-how is that possible?!”

Finally, she located the porcelain doll. But it was slumped down in the shade of one of the conservatory’s many lush tropical trees, as if someone had hidden it there. Only its long blond hair peeped out from behind the luxuriant foliage. Cuiaran roughly grabbed the doll by the hair and wrapped her hands around the thin torso.

“I’ll be damned! How did you end up in a place like this? Don’t tell me Kujou moved you? Or ... did a doll try to hide from me on its own...? How ridiculous....”

Cuiaran burst out laughing at her own words.

She opened the suitcase and savagely threw the doll inside.

Just then...

The sound of someone flinging open the door to the library echoed from the world far below. Cuiaran shut the suitcase and walked over to the railing to look down at the first floor.

There she caught sight of Kazuya Kujou rushing inside. Sucking her teeth in annoyance, Cuiaran picked up the suitcase and began to run downstairs.

“...Victorique!?” yelled Kazuya, starting to run up the staircase. He looked up at the distant top of the maze of stairs and saw a girl with a stony look on her face running downward.

He halted, and the girl did the same.

Her eyes were so very cold....

But then the girl smiled, and it was as if she had transformed into an entirely different person. “Well, if it isn’t Ku—”

“Cuiaran!”

At the sound of Kazuya’s shout, the girl’s face instantly froze. Then she shifted back to her previous expression, her eyes glinting with a hard light. “...You figured it out, huh?”

“I’ve seen through you. We’ve already rescued the real Avril.”

“Tch!” Avril—no, the second Cuiaran—suddenly began to speak in an entirely different tone of voice, betraying a brash city accent. “That’s right. I’m the second Cuiaran. I was taken in as a child and raised as a thief. But the first Cuiaran disappeared suddenly eight years ago. Rumor had it that he hid his loot somewhere in this school, so I came to take a look. ...I don’t suppose you know who the first one was, right?”

“You mean Maxim?” answered Kazuya.

Cuiaran blinked in surprise. “...That’s right. I never expected to see him come tumbling out of the crypt as that mummified knight. But then I found that purple book on the floor. That was one of his treasures that he hid inside this school when he came on his springtime visits. He stole it from that explorer Sir Bradley,

who was going to give it to his granddaughter as her inheritance. Once I figured that out, I made sure to hide it somewhere. But then you... Where did you hide it?"

"Wait... So that means you were the one who attacked me from behind and stole that book?"

"Of course it was me. But *all you had* was the book."

Kazuya didn't follow. "Huh?"

"What happened to the [Penny Black](#)?"

"What's that?"

Cuiaran glared at him. "I couldn't care less about that book, so I threw it away in the flower garden. What I'm looking for is the Penny Black. Oh, damn you.... You know the postcard inside that book? That was Sir Bradley's legacy."

Kazuya shouted in surprise. He remembered the way Victorique suddenly lost interest in the book after they had found it, and had simply vanished into thin air, taking along the postcard that had been used as a bookmark. But at the time, he had no idea why she had done that....

"Then it's not the book, but the postcard...?"

"That's right. Where is it?" Cuiaran descended several steps down the stairs.

"If you mean the postcard, Victorique took it with—"

"What are you talking about? There isn't any girl in the conservatory."

They stared at one another, each positioned at one end of the staircase. Kazuya looked up at Cuiaran, dumbfounded.

"I went to the top floor twice. But the conservatory was empty both times. You keep insisting there's a girl there, but there isn't one," she snapped.

"Wh-what...?"

"It's dusty and gloomy, and there's no one there. The conservatory has been empty for a very, very long time. You must have seen a fairy. Didn't I tell you? 'A golden fairy inhabits the top of the library.' You are a foreign student from the Far East who found no classmates willing to be your friend, and so you spend all

your time studying out of stubbornness. 'Fairies make friends with lonely children, then steal their souls.' ...We have that legend in my hometown, too." Cuian stared down at Kazuya. "That girl doesn't exist!"

Her words deeply wounded him.

There was some truth to what she said. In the past half year since he had arrived, he couldn't fit in with his aristocratic classmates, and hadn't made any new friends. For this reason, even though he was duty-bound as the third son of an imperial soldier to suppress any unmanly feelings that welled up inside himself, the truth was that he secretly felt very happy when he met Victorique. She may have been eccentric, and there were times he couldn't quite understand her, and even felt angry with her. But she was still his dear friend, the first one he had made since coming to Sauvure.

And there was no way she didn't exist.

"Th-that's impossible!"

Cuian sneered at his hurt expression. "Still can't accept it?"

"You're wrong...."

"Hmph. Then I guess I'll have to show you who your friend really is."

With a cold-blooded smile on her face, Cuian slowly raised the suitcase. Kazuya stood looking up at her, motionless in shock.

When she opened the lid....

He heard a rustling sound.

Long blond hair spilled out of the suitcase.

The hem of a sumptuous dress peeked out of a corner.

Two frozen glass eyes stared open, unblinking.

"Vi...?"

Cuian violently flung open the suitcase. A small girl tumbled out from it, falling down toward Kazuya. He frantically reached out to catch her, but her dress made of gorgeously-embroidered Gobelins tapestry, and the lace bonnet that adorned her silken blond hair, slipped through his fingers, plummeting to

the distant bottom of the atrium below.

Kazuya ran to the side of the staircase and screamed.

At that moment, two deputies, clad in rabbit-skin hunting caps and holding each other's hands, entered the library in pursuit of Kazuya. Looking up, they found something falling toward them. They hastily raised their linked hands to grab hold of the girl—no, the doll in the form of a girl, and managed to catch it lightly in mid-air.

Kazuya stared down at them in mute shock.

“...Whoa! A doll fell on us! It almost broke. Oh no, the head fell off!” shouted the two deputies.

Kazuya looked up at Cuilaran dazedly. Her face was contorted into a fearsome expression. “Do you get it now? There was never a girl in the conservatory. But I did find that doll. It's the work of the 19th century German dollmaker Grafenstein. They say he made a deal with the devil so he could give his dolls souls. His creations became monsters possessed by evil spirits, and there are rumors of them wandering around at night. ...Now, Kujou.” Cuilaran threw away the suitcase and advanced upon Kazuya.

He was still stunned.

Victorique... doesn't exist...? That can't be....

He heard the suitcase shatter upon the ground floor far below him.

It's not true. Victorique ... is real!

Cuilaran grabbed Kazuya by his neck and squeezed with tremendous force. “Come on, where did you really hide it? Where did you hide the Penny Black? Give it back! Give it back!”

“I, I don't know ... where...”

“If you don't have it, someone else does. Give it back to me!”

Kazuya struggled with Cuilaran in the middle of the labyrinthine staircase. The wooden stairs creaked and swayed unsteadily.

And then...

Something small and golden appeared in Kazuya's line of sight.

He narrowed his eyes, trying to make it out.

Far away, near the distant ceiling, the face of a girl peered out from between slats of railing. Her green eyes shone with an ominous light, and her splendidly long blond hair seemed to ripple and dance in anger, as if it possessed a will of its own.

...It was Victorique.

She parted her cherry-red lips, and said in a low voice, as husky as that of an old woman, "Kujou doesn't have it ... but I do."

Cuiaran squeaked in surprise. Then, lifting her gaze, she slowly turned around, and saw Victorique standing at the top of the staircase, straining to hold up a heavy stack of books with her small hands.

"Get your hands off Kujou!"

The books fell.

As Cuiaran stared at her with wide eyes, the books collapsed upon her head with a dull thud. She rolled down the staircase, arms akimbo, with the covers of the books still stuck to her face.

Then Victorique went on to say something unforgivable. "For that man is my *servant*."

Normally, Kazuya would never have let such a remark pass without raising a firm and lengthy objection in defense of his honor as the third son of an imperial soldier. But this time he didn't quite catch what she had said, and so his words were brief. "Victorique... I knew you existed!"

"How rude." Victorique gave a snort of indignation. And then she slowly moved out of sight, her blond hair vanishing a moment later, writhing like the tail of a dinosaur as it trailed behind her body, engulfed in frills and lace.

Only her husky voice lingered in Kazuya's ears.

"...Of course I exist!"

four

[4]

The second Cuiaran tumbled uncontrollably down the wooden staircase. Inspector de Blois entered the library and arrested her, then carried her off to the village police station with the help of the two hand-holding deputies.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Kazuya slowly trudged up the stairs. At last, he reached the conservatory at the very top floor, and surveyed the scene before him.

Victorique was sitting in the position that he had become thoroughly used to over the course of the past several days—seated upon the floor and smoking her pipe as she turned the pages of the books that encircled her, radiating out in all directions.

She heard Kazuya approach her, but didn't bother to raise her gaze from her books. Instead, she simply removed the pipe from her lips and said, "You're late."

Her face wore the same cool expression he had beheld the day he first met her, that aloof arrogance universal among this country's aristocrats. The mere sight of it inflamed the stubbornness in his heart.

But for once, Kazuya didn't let that bother him. He bent down to sit beside Victorique. "What's that supposed to mean? That just as usual, you're the only one who knows everything?"

"Of course, thanks to my wellspring of wisdom." Victorique sighed wearily, then added grudgingly, "I take fragments of chaos from within this world and toy with them to pass the time. Once they're collected, I reconstruct those fragments by means of my wellspring of wisdom.... Then a long, maddening tedium comes upon me once again, and I'm left feeling empty inside."

"...Well, before you get bored again, explain it to me first."

"So, you want me to articulate it for you." Victorique yawned heavily. "But it's such a bother."

She silently watched Kazuya, who was waiting impatiently. Then she let out a small groan, and reluctantly began to speak again. “Very well. I shall explain, and then perhaps even a mediocre person like you may understand.”

Warm, bright sunlight shone into the conservatory. A spring breeze entered through the skylights, gently ruffling the hair of the two young people sitting in the sun.

Victorique pulled out the postcard that had been sandwiched inside the purple book. The postcard was addressed to Avril from her grandfather Sir Bradley, but had never been mailed.

“Penny Black is the name of a stamp. It’s the oldest stamp in the world. That alone would make it valuable, but there were also a handful with printing errors, and those have even greater value. One of those stamps is affixed to this postcard.”

“Wow...” Kazuya took the postcard and carefully inspected the stamp.

“Collectors would throw away huge sums of money to acquire such a rare item. But the first Cuiaran stole this heirloom, which Sir Bradley had meant to pass down to his granddaughter, and he placed it inside this purple book, which he then brought to this school. And then it accompanied him into his eternal rest inside the crypt.”

“I see. But Victorique, how did you know that the girl I saw in the storehouse was the real Avril, kidnapped by Cuiaran?”

“That girl was likely used by the second Cuiaran as a way for her to infiltrate the school. She imprisoned her inside that storehouse and impersonated her so that she could search for the loot hidden by the first Cuiaran. And the reason she chose the storehouse as Avril’s place of confinement was the same reason that she hid the purple book inside the library.”

Victorique took a drag from her pipe. “Recall how the second Cuiaran hid that book next to the thirteenth step of the library’s staircase. She was taking advantage of the ghost stories that infest this school. ‘An ill fate befalls those who tread on the thirteenth step of the stairs.’ That was why all of the students

avoided the thirteenth step, and that was why she hid the book there.”

“Okay...”

“The reason she hid the real Avril inside that storehouse was also because of a ghost story, the one about Millie Marle’s ghost haunting the abandoned storehouse. So no one dared go near that building. ...But no one ever could have expected that a strange fellow like you would pass by.”

Kazuya nodded, impressed by her deductions.

After this, Victorique proceeded to smoke her pipe and ignore him for a few moments. Then she suddenly looked up at him.

“Wh-what?”

“Here’s a little something extra. I’ll articulate another fact for you.” Her green eyes gleamed with an uncanny light. “About that ghost story which has caused you so much grief, ‘the traveler who comes in spring brings death to the school.’ The ‘reaper’ here was a reference to Maxim. You recall how Maxim, the first Cuiaran, came back to the school every spring? Of course, he came to hide his ill-gotten gains, but he also happened to be a sinister man in general. It’s possible that a dead body appeared each time he returned, and that Millie Marle may not have been the only one. That sinister image of the ‘reaper who comes in spring’ may have been modeled on the first Cuiaran. At least, that’s what I think.”

Kazuya stared at Victorique’s cold face in mute amazement.

He imagined fragments of chaos dancing in the air, then crashing to the ground as she reconstructed them with a mere glance—as if her eyes were focused on some strange magic.

Kazuya made a sound of awe. “Victorique, you’re incredible.”

Her facial expression shifted slightly, looking almost exultant. In that moment of barely perceptible change, her ennui, despair, and the peculiar sort of darkness that had shrouded her face for so long, seemed to finally lift and disappear.

“So that means...” After a few moments of silence, Kazuya spoke again.

Victorique raised her eyebrows questioningly.

“I guess you do exist, huh...”

Victorique looked up, peering at him suspiciously. “Not that again. Of course I exist.”

“B-but...” murmured Kazuya. “That second Cuiaran came to the conservatory twice, and said you weren’t here either time. She said it was dark and there was nobody around.”

Victorique was silent for a moment.

A thin white line of smoke rose straight to the ceiling, followed by a clear spring breeze that blew briskly through the conservatory.

“...I didn’t know her,” Victorique whispered suddenly.

“Come again?”

“I didn’t know her, so I hid.”

“You hid? Wh-where?”

Exasperation written all over her face, Victorique looked up from her books and pointed at a small chest nearby.

Kazuya stared at the chest in bewilderment.

It was a rectangular box that didn’t appear large enough to admit a person. But if someone as small as Victorique crouched into a ball, she may have been able to fit inside somehow....

Kazuya carefully reached out his hand and opened the door to the chest.

His expression turned to a look of amazement.

Inside the chest was a lamp, some sweets, and some books. The door was designed so that it could be locked from the inside.

“...Were you in here?”

“....”

“Do you always hide in here when strangers come by?”

Victorique said nothing.

I wonder if she's actually extremely shy? Understanding dawned on Kazuya. But then a thought suddenly crossed his mind. *Wait a minute. What about when...*

As Victorique ignored him, busying herself with her books, he asked, "But when I came up here for the first time, you didn't know who I was either, right?"

"...Mmm."

"And yet you were sitting right here reading your books, just as calmly as ever. And you were the one who spoke first, remember? Oh, Victorique, I remember what you said to me. 'It wasn't enough that you were late to class, but on top of that, you've decided to come play truant in the library?'"

"...Mm."

"Why didn't you hide from me?"

Victorique didn't reply.

Kazuya waited a while, then gave up with a sigh. "Well, not that it matters any..." Then he took a glance at her. *Hold on...?*

Victorique's face was cold and expressionless as usual, but for some reason, her ears were bright red.

Oh...? Kazuya cocked his head. "What happened to your ears?"

"My ears...?"

"They're red."

"...No, they're not."

"Yes, they are."

"...No, they're not."

"But—"

"If I say they're not red, then they're not red!"

Victorique lifted up her book and slammed the corner into the side of Kazuya's head. With this, he decided to stop saying things that would provoke her, even if he didn't know why exactly she found them so disagreeable.

A gust of springtime air blew between them, delicately rustling Victorique's blond hair.

What if... Kazuya thought to himself. I thought that I had brought her those exotic snacks, and had climbed that labyrinthine staircase, and had asked for Victorique's help out of my own free will, but...

The wind blew once more.

What if I was the one chosen by Victorique?

The sky began to darken.

Surely Victorique was calling out to me. And that's how we became friends...

Kazuya felt somehow greatly honored by this.

five

[5]

Kazuya slowly walked out of the library and headed down the white pebbled road. In the distance, he heard someone yell, “Hey, Kujou!”

The voice belonged to Inspector de Blois. Kazuya looked up to find him standing in another one of his poses.

“The case may have been solved thanks to my hard work, but there’s still much to be done. Apparently, most of Cuilaran’s loot is still slumbering somewhere on campus. It’s been quite the headache to locate all of it!”

“I see....” Kazuya’s attention was drawn to the object that the inspector was holding under his arm. When he recognized it, he frowned. “Um... Why are you carrying around that doll?”

“Oh, this?” The inspector cradled the doll gently in his arms, then said boastfully, “Isn’t she a beauty? She was crafted by Grafenstein, the genius dollmaker.”

“...Huh.”

“One of his dolls alone is worth more than a house, you know.”

“....?”

“I had forgotten where I put it, and I was looking for it all over. It’s a good thing I found it, my boy.”

Kazuya gave a start, remembering how he had seen the inspector looking for something earlier. Then he said in exasperation, “So that was *your* doll? For God’s sake! A major misunderstanding happened because of that doll! It really had me ... worried sick....”

The inspector was taken aback at the sight of Kazuya’s anger. Then a loud cracking sound came suddenly from the porcelain doll’s neck, prompting the inspector to emit an earsplitting shriek. “Aaah! The head’s falling off!”

“Well, it was handled a little roughly earlier...”

“D-did you do that?”

“Cuiaran dropped it.”

“Th-that damned thief...!” the inspector growled, trembling in rage. Kazuya walked away from him.

Kazuya shyly peeked into the infirmary. “Avril? Avril...? Oh, there you are.”

Miss Cécile was seated next to an elderly doctor who had arrived from the village. As Kazuya entered the room, they both turned around to look at him. The real Avril, who had been rescued from the storehouse just a short while earlier, was sitting up in bed, munching away at a mouthful of food. She looked famished.

Avril looked up at the sound of Kazuya’s voice, and beamed at him cheerfully. “Are you Kujou? Miss Cécile told me your name. Thank you for rescuing me earlier.”

“Uh, not at all...” Kazuya felt slightly charmed by the sight of her vivacious, carefree smile.

Avril continued to speak while chewing. “So, what happened is that after I crossed over from England and got on the train to Sauvure, I started chatting with this woman who was sitting in the same compartment, and I told her all sorts of things about myself. Like my name, how old I was, and that I was going to study abroad at St. Marguerite’s School. I also talked about my memories of my grandpa....”

“Oh. So then she...?”

“Exactly! So I ended up telling her about my family’s stolen heirloom. That my dear grandfather, the explorer Sir Bradley, had left it to me as my inheritance, and how I had hoped to use that to become a woman explorer someday, but then it was stolen by the great thief Cuiaran.... I also mentioned about hearing a rumor that Cuiaran had hidden it somewhere on the campus of St. Marguerite’s School, and that I decided to come here to study so I could look for it.... But, but...” Avril’s cheeks puffed out in frustration.

“But that woman turned out to be the second Cuianan herself. And she had been looking for the loot hidden by the first Cuianan. She came with me to the school, and held me captive inside the storehouse. And then she got inside the school as a student, pretending to be me.”

Avril’s mood suddenly turned upbeat, and she added gamely, “But I bit her right on the fingers of her right hand. And that got her so mad at me that she tied me up....”

Kazuya recalled Cuianan’s injured fingers. *So that was from Avril biting her.... This girl must be pretty tough.*

Avril looked up at Kazuya with a sunny smile. “I felt so low the whole time. So when you came to rescue me, I thought you were my black-haired prince. Ha, ha, ha!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” Miss Cécile joined in her laughter. “Kujou, a prince! Ha, ha, ha!”

“...Miss Cécile, it isn’t that funny,” said Kazuya crossly.

She quieted down, but then—“Hee-hee!”—burst into another guffaw.

Kazuya sucked on his teeth in annoyance and sulked for a moment. Then he pulled out the postcard that Victorique had given him—the postcard affixed with the Penny Black—and handed it to Avril.

Avril stared at it for a minute, dumbfounded, before flinging away her half-eaten sandwich. Miss Cécile made a startled squeak and reached out to catch the flying sandwich in mid-air.

Avril reverently took the postcard from Kazuya, tears filling her eyes. “Grandpa!”

“I’m happy for you. It’s back safe in your hands.”

“Y-yeah!”

A message from the explorer Sir Bradley to his granddaughter was written on the postcard. *I am giving this to you in hopes that you’ll become a splendid woman explorer when you grow up someday. Use this to cover the cost of your expeditions. Soon your grandpa will cross the Atlantic in a hot air balloon. I’ll see you again when I come back!*

Avril broke down sobbing. Through her tears, she still managed to flash a bright smile at Kazuya. “Thank you, Kujou.”

“Not at all...”

“I’ve only just arrived here, so there’s lots I still don’t know about this place. I hope you’ll be my guide.”

“O-okay...”

“Let’s be friends, Kujou.”

“Sure, but...” Kazuya had no problem with being asked to befriend a cute girl, but he couldn’t help but feel slightly apprehensive. After all, thanks to the ghost stories circulating around campus, he was the man labeled as the infamous “reaper who comes in spring”. Once Avril found out, she might start to feel afraid of him, too....

But then again, Avril is a foreign student, and unlike the other students here, she may not even be interested in ghost stories at all....

Kazuya collected himself, and decided to pose a question to her. “By the way, Avril. Do you like ghost stories?”

She answered cheerily, and without the slightest hesitation. “I love them!”

“Is that right...” Kazuya hung his head.

In the small, affluent Western European nation of Sauvure, a foreign student, Kazuya Kujou, came from a certain country in the Orient to St. Marguerite’s School, a distinguished academy soaring high up in the Alps. There he met the beautiful young girl Victorique, the mysterious challenger to chaos who spent her days secluded in the library tower.

And now the adventurer’s granddaughter, Avril Bradley, had also arrived...

Later on, they would be entangled into the sinister phenomena revolving around an accursed serial poisoning countess and the loot left behind by the great thief Cuiaran, and they would end up turning the school upside down.

But that was, once again, an entirely different story....

one

chapter five — the headless lady comes at three in the morning

[1]

It was another bright and sunny morning at St. Marguerite's School.

The hallways, normally filled with running students clutching their textbooks after having piled out of the dormitory en masse, were now empty on this Sunday morning, and quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

A petite woman emerged from an atrium lined with unglazed copper-colored tiles on the floor, and strode purposefully into a corridor that was enclosed by a high ceiling trussed with innumerable beams. She wore large round glasses and wavy brunette hair down to her shoulders, and looked remarkably baby-faced on account of her large, moist eyes. This woman—Miss Cécile—grumbled to herself, a large loop of keys gripped in her hand.

“If I recall correctly, the answer key to that textbook was in the reading room.... My goodness, Kujou, you keep asking questions that no teacher would know the answer to. I hope you don't think that being a teacher means I know everything... when that's not even possible! So keep in mind, Kujou....”

She continued talking to herself, her voice echoing in the empty hallway at a slightly louder volume than it needed to be. “—That when I was a student here, my grades were awful, just awful compared to yours, OK? Got that? ...Wait, this isn't exactly something I should be boasting about....”

Her shoulders slumping, she walked up to the door of the room in question, inserted a large key into the lock, and turned it. “Oops, the lock is rusty. Well, I shouldn't be surprised; it's been such a long time since anyone's gone inside that people started calling it the ‘Sealed Reading Room’....”

Cécile opened the huge door, which was the deep brown color of laurelwood. A dusty, damp smell wafted into the hallway from the interior of the reading room. Inside was an oval tea table and bookshelves overlaid with glass doors. She hurried inside. “I need to find that answer key to prepare for Monday's

lesson—right, this one. Okay...”

She quickly walked back to the door, hugging a thin book to her chest. But then she suddenly raised her head and looked up at the wall.

Cécile tightly closed her large eyes.

And then she opened them again.

As she stared at the wall, tears began welling up in her eyes.

Then she tremblingly closed them once more....

And then...

“It’s, it’s ... a ghost!”

Screaming at the top of her lungs, she tore off her glasses and dashed out of the room as fast as she could.

Meanwhile, in another hallway on the other side of the U-shaped main building....

“All right... So over there is the bathroom where the spirit of the Sphinx appears and asks a riddle. And where was that ghost of the dead Indian elephant that was brought to Sauvure for an exhibition...? And then...”

The girl, dressed neatly in her uniform, had been walking around campus peering into her notebook all Sunday morning. She was a lively young lady with short blond hair, bright blue eyes, and long, lithe limbs reminiscent of a young doe.

The girl—the foreign student Avril Bradley—came to a stop.

“Hmm... I knew it was going to be difficult to find my way around with just a map. So I still don’t feel too familiar with the campus. But since I won’t be starting classes until next week, I haven’t made any friends yet. ...Oh, I know!” She clapped her hands together.

“There’s Kujou, that Oriental boy who rescued me from the storehouse. Let me think.... Where could I find him? It would be nice if he could show me around campus, but it’s not like I can go in the boys’ dormi—whoa!”

The floor suddenly seemed to shift underneath Avril's feet, causing her to fall hard on her bottom. "Oww!" she groaned while looking down to see where she had tripped.

Her foot was caught in a gap where the flooring had moved out of place. She removed her foot and eyed the hole suspiciously.

There was something inside.

She saw the faint sheen of a gleaming purple object.

Despite not knowing what awaited her in the darkness, Avril—perhaps bravely, perhaps recklessly, but either way without a moment's hesitation—thrust her hand into the hole. She grabbed hold of the purple object, and held it up to the light.

Clasped in her hand was a large necklace. It was beautifully arrayed with glittering purple jewels, and yet it also seemed somehow sinister. But Avril was heedless of the peculiarly weighty aura to that necklace, and she casually held it up to her face and examined it from every angle, her large eyes open wide.

Then she suddenly cried out, "Oh! Th-this is the same necklace that was in one of the best ghost stories of all, Countess Ashenden's 'Poison Flower'!"

She excitedly flipped through her notebook until she found the correct page, and then compared the description in her notes with the jewelry she held in her hand. "I knew it! But why would it be here? Oh my gosh! Now what? Well, anyway ... I just found something fantastic. Yahoo!"

Avril stamped her feet on the ground, then happily exclaimed again, "Yahoo, yahoo!"

And meanwhile...

In a quiet corner of the campus of St. Marguerite's School, in a room on the second floor of the boys' dormitory...

"Whoa! What time is it?! Did I oversleep? ...Oh, wait, it's a Sunday."

A young, small-boned Asian boy jolted awake in a large mahogany bed, decorated with a motif of intertwining leaves, and fumbled for his clock. Deep

black eyes the color of ebony stared out from underneath his short black hair.

“...Well, even if it is a Sunday, the third son of an imperial soldier couldn’t possibly allow himself to indulge in a single moment of indolence. I have to wake up immediately, wash my face, eat my breakfast, and then get to studying—oh, but I’m so sleepy. Wait, wait, I’ve already been late once this week after getting dragged into that murder case. And then I jumped out of the window of the classroom, and that counts as an absence even though I did show up on time. So that’s two demerits already. Let’s wake up, then. ...But I’m still so sleepy....”

The boy—Kazuya Kujou—sat up sluggishly, his expression as serious as ever despite the sleepiness in his eyes. He tied together the front of the dark blue [yukata](#) he wore as a nightshirt, and just as he was about to climb out of bed to wash his face, heard a knock come from the door.

“Who is it?”

“...It’s me!” A deep womanly voice answered in a singsong tone.

Kazuya jumped up in surprise. While in the middle of groggily considering the fact that it was now too late for him to pretend he was out, he saw the door open on its own.

“Good mo-orning, Kujou!” The voluptuous redheaded housemother stood at the door. “You know, there was this creepy guy with a weird hairstyle,” she began to say, but then broke off mid-sentence and gave Kazuya an intense stare.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

“That looks pretty. It’s got a wonderfully Oriental flair! ...I’ll take it!”

“Y-you’ll take it?!”

The housemother began to roughly yank off Kazuya’s nightshirt. His struggling was for naught as his yukata slipped off his body and was snatched away along with his sash. Kazuya shrieked and dove under the covers of his bed while shouting at her in protest, “That’s my nightshirt!”

“Can I wear it to a dance party in the village tonight?”

“No, you may not! Please give it back!”

“I’ll give it back to you later.” She grinned and waved her hand at him, then

swiftly turned on her heel to leave his room.

Just as she was about to close the door, Kazuya quickly asked her, “Um, what was that you were saying about the creepy guy with the weird hairstyle?”

“Whaddya talking about? ...Oh, that.” She poked her head back into the room. “Right now, there’s this young fellow with pointy blond hair in this style that I can’t even begin to describe, but only made me think what a waste of a handsome face, and he said he had a message for you. Hmm, what was it now. Uh ... sorry, I forgot.”

“...”

“I think he wanted you to go somewhere.”

“...You mean, to the library?”

“Oh, yes! That’s it!” The housemother nodded, then grinned and waved at him, and shut the door behind her.

Kazuya sighed.

He looked outside the window. The bright springtime sunlight shone in from the French-style window, scattering light upon the carpet. It was an idyllic Sunday morning.

“Okay ... to the library, then.” Kazuya reluctantly climbed out of bed and started to unenthusiastically put on his clothes.

He had placed a letter that he had received last night from his second eldest brother on the mahogany desk. Kazuya folded it up and tucked it into his breast pocket, then left his room.

two

[2]

The stone-hewn walls of St. Marguerite's Library, draped with entwining grey ivies, stood in silence, observing the endless passage of time. On this Sunday morning, that four-sided tower, containing a huge book repository renowned throughout Europe, continued in relentless cultivation of a unique state of knowledge, time, and tranquility, just as it had for centuries.

Kazuya opened the leather-covered swing door, hammered through with round brass tacks. The moment he stepped into the atrium, he was seized by the distinct feeling that every wall, completely occupied by bookshelves crammed full with antique books, had groaned in exasperation all at once, tired of his repeated visits. A thin, maze-like wooden staircase zigzagged across the atrium, underneath a solemn religious fresco that gazed down from the distant ceiling.

"Not this staircase again... I guess I'm not used to it yet...." Kazuya grumbled softly. He straightened his posture and gave himself a determined nod, then began to ascend the labyrinth of stairs, taking steady and methodical footsteps one by one.

This was the seventh time Kazuya had climbed this strange staircase. The very first time was when his teacher Miss Cécile had asked him to deliver notes to a classmate at the top floor of the library. And then the fifth time... The fifth time...

"Now why did I come here that day?" Kazuya bent his head quizzically as he climbed the stairs. Then his face tightened in a barely perceptible frown. The thought had only just occurred to him that somewhere along the way, without even realizing it, he had fallen into the daily habit of climbing this maze of stairs over and over again in order to visit that girl.

"Well, a lot of things have happened lately, and I needed her help...." he whispered to himself in excuse. "It's not like I actually want to see Victorique...."

After a few minutes, he finally reached the expansive floor at the very top, and from there entered the conservatory.

The gentle rays of the morning sun shone through skylights, alighting upon the large tropical plants and garish flowers that bloomed in this greenhouse. The strange, enigmatic princess that he expected to find half-sprawled upon the floor, surrounded by books to fill her tedium—was today nowhere to be found. In her place, he found only a peculiar-looking young man, sullenly squatting down in a corner next to the elevator.

He was wearing a finely-tailored three-piece suit with gleaming silver cufflinks. But contrary to his immaculate fashion sense, there was one thing off about him—his bizarre hairstyle, with his blond hair piled forward and twisted into a shape that suggested a drill. This man—Gréville de Blois—was hugging his knees, appearing to be mumbling something under his breath. “Two hundred and one, two hundred and two, two hundred and three...”

His suspicions piqued, Kazuya gingerly crept forward to take a closer look. He found the inspector counting the white tiles on the floor of the elevator landing one by one. As Kazuya shrank back in uneasiness, the inspector caught sight of him. “You’re late, Kujou,” he said reproachfully, albeit not without a hint of delight.

“...What did you want to see me about? And more importantly, what are you doing?”

“There was nobody here, so I got bored.”

“Nobody here...?” Kazuya scanned the conservatory. Thinking he spotted Victorique somewhere in the distance, he moved closer, and confirmed that it was indeed her.

Victorique, perhaps trying to avoid the inspector, was hidden deep amongst the plants. And for some reason, she was sitting in the same position that Kazuya had seen the inspector take earlier: crouched down, busily doing something that he couldn’t quite make out. He looked at her daintily flowing chiffon dress, dyed the color of redcurrant, her chic lace-up shoes, and her long, magnificent blond hair, draped across her back like a turban come undone—and noticed that all of them were caked in dirt.

“...Victorique?”

He saw her shoulders twitch. Then she turned around to look at him, a startled

expression on her face. “Oh, you again. You’re that odd Oriental by the name of, um, Kujou, if I recall correctly.”

“...That’s right. Although the ‘odd’ bit was a little unnecessary. ...Whoa, you’re covered in dirt! What have you been doing?”

Kazuya rushed over to Victorique’s side and began to wipe off her hair, the hem of her chiffon dress, and her small hands. She had apparently been doing some gardening, and the pearly white fingernails of her small hands were now stained brown with dirt.

Kazuya quickly drew a pail of water and returned to wash Victorique’s hands, despite her attempts to pull away. From afar he heard Inspector de Blois, still counting tiles, call out to him, “So, Kujou. Let’s get on with the reason I called you here today.”

“What was it? Although I’ve kind of got my hands full at the moment...”

The inspector grudgingly walked over and held out a sheaf of papers. Kazuya gave them a quick glance, but Victorique ignored them, instead plunging her face into a tuft of large red flowers.

“So what we have here is a list of all the valuables that Cuiaran stole all over Europe, then stored in various hiding places around St. Marguerite’s School. The only item that has been recovered so far is the oldest stamp in the world, the Penny Black, which was safely delivered to its owner Miss Bradley the other day. But we otherwise don’t know where the rest of the items were hidden. That means my next task is to go treasure-hunting for Cuiaran’s loot.”

Kazuya looked back up at him. As he had suspected, the inspector was for once directing his words not to him, but to Victorique, who continued to ignore him, burying her face in the flowers.

Each time he was confronted with a criminal case, Inspector de Blois would rely on the intelligence of the gifted and mysterious Victorique to solve it, and would then proceed to pass off her achievement as his own. But on the other hand, Victorique and this inspector seemed to despise each other, and refused to speak to one another. Whenever the inspector wanted to talk to her about the particulars of some case, he had the bad habit of sitting Kazuya down and stubbornly pretending to talk to him instead....

Returning to his usual angle facing Kazuya, the inspector said, “Take a look at this. At the top of the list is this painting entitled ‘South Atlantic.’ This is the last work of a talented painter who called it quits with the European art scene and moved to an island in the southern Atlantic. It was stolen from a certain royal residence around twenty years ago. And then there’s this necklace that belonged to Countess Ashenden, nicknamed ‘The Poison Flower.’ This one was stolen from the Sauvure National Museum. And then...”

Each item on the inspector’s list was accompanied by a picture, including one that seemed to be a reproduction of the aforementioned painting, and another of a garish necklace adorned with glittering purple jewels. He went on to describe the rest of the items without pausing for breath.

Kazuya continued to scrub Victorique’s fingers vigorously. “Never mind that... Victorique, how long have you been digging in the dirt like this? You’ve gotten your dress and your fingernails so dirty. When you were little, didn’t your mama ever scold you for playing in the mud? Ugh, I still can’t seem to clean it off....”

“Mm?” Victorique finally withdrew her face from the flowers, drawing her brows together in an irritated frown. “Now we have two noisy people.”

“...My apologies. Still, at least it’s not boring for you, right?”

“Didn’t I tell you that commotion is my second greatest enemy?”

“Oh, did you now?”

The inspector silently kept a close ear on their conversation.

Then Victorique raised her head. “By the way, Kujou.”

“What? ...Look, I’ve finally gotten your nails clean.”

“Are you interested in the rest of Cuianan’s loot? Do you want me to look for it?”

Kazuya gave Victorique’s small, startlingly well-sculpted face a bewildered stare. Then he cocked his head bemusedly. “...No, not really?”

“Hmm.” Victorique nodded. “Me neither.”

“That’s what I thought. Whoa, inspector?! Why are you trying to choke me? If I’m not interested, then I’m just not interested. And why would you even want

to call someone out on a Sunday morning for something like that, when locating stolen property is your job as a policeman! That's what I'd like to know! I strongly object! Uh, wait, Victorique...!"

As he struggled to free himself from the inspector's tight grip around his neck, Victorique slunk away from him, her hair swaying like a long, golden tail attached to some ancient, languorous creature. When she returned to squatting on the ground in the garden, Kazuya raised his voice in protest. "Hey! It took a long time to get you clean, you know!"

Victorique looked over her shoulder and snorted at him dismissively. Then she once again began to dig in the dirt, heedless of Kazuya's complaints.

"You shouldn't play in the mud! V-Victorique!?"

three

[3]

Kazuya left the library and walked along the white pebbled path, his eyes downcast.

That Victorique... I can never seem to figure out what she's thinking.... Are we on better terms with each other now? Is she seeing me as her friend a little bit more now? I just can't tell at all....

It was another warm and sunny morning. Kazuya navigated his way around the white fountains, hedges, and flowerbeds neatly arranged throughout the French-style gardens that sprawled across campus. The merry laughter and light footsteps of uniformed students scurrying about echoed through the school grounds.

"Hey, Kujou!"

Kazuya heard a cheerful voice call out to him, accompanied by the pitter-pat of feet excitedly running toward him. Wondering who it was, he turned around, and found a familiar girl—Avril Bradley—fast approaching him, waving something clasped in her hand.

"Oh, it's you," said Kazuya.

"Heh-heh! I finally found you. I've been looking for you all over," Avril said, sounding genuinely happy.

Kazuya felt himself cheer up slightly. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah! I start classes tomorrow. I can't wait!"

Just a few days ago, Avril had been in dire straits after being kidnapped by the self-appointed successor to the infamous thief Cuilaran. Thanks to a tip from Victorique, Kazuya and Inspector de Blois had rushed to her rescue. Avril looked very frail when they had discovered her, but she now seemed to have made a full recovery. At that time, Kazuya had felt very happy when she asked him to be her friend. But the Avril now before his eyes revealed a buoyant personality that lacked a single trace of shyness.

“I’ve just been making a pilgrimage to all of the spots on campus that appear in the ghost stories. You should come with me!”

“Gh-ghost stories? Count me out!” Kazuya said, flinching away from her.

After all, it was the fault of those stories that Kazuya ended up getting dubbed the “Grim Reaper” just as soon as he arrived. And that caused him a lot of trouble even now....

But Avril, oblivious to his reaction, only continued smilingly, “Why not? It’s so fun! Guess what, something terrific just happened to me a little while ago!” She waved something purple at him—it appeared to be a necklace. “Do you know what this is? It’s from the ‘headless lady comes at three in the morning’ story.”

“Sorry, can’t say that I’m familiar with it!”

Avril pointed to one of the benches dotting the park. After the two of them sat down, she began toying with the purple necklace in her hand.

“There’s a ‘sealed reading room’ on campus. Inside of it, you can find the portrait of a noblewoman, the countess Ashenden. She poisoned a lot of people to death, and terrorized the Sauvure aristocracy in the Middle Ages.”

“Huh...” Kazuya was seized by a sudden attack of drowsiness. As he idly gazed at Avril fidgeting with the necklace, he could only manage some noncommittal noises in response.

“Countess Ashenden always wore an amethyst necklace. It was called the ‘Poison Flower’. That’s because she believed that amethyst was capable of changing its color in reaction to a poison. She was a wicked noblewoman who sought the king’s favor, and poisoned the women who stood in her way one by one. But she was always deathly afraid that someday someone would poison her, too. So she even welded the clasp on her necklace shut so it could never be removed. When she was finally sent to the gallows to answer for her crimes, the moment of her beheading was the first time that that necklace had fallen off her neck since she first put it on.”

Kazuya pondered for a moment. *Wait a minute, haven’t I heard this story somewhere before...?* The image of a golden drill arose in his mind for a split second. *Did I already hear about this from someone else?*

“So ever since then, people have reported seeing the ghost of a headless Countess Ashenden walking through campus every night. She got loose from her portrait in the Sealed Reading Room and now she wanders around. But no one knows when or why that portrait was hung in that room. One day it just suddenly appeared on the wall. I bet the countess’ ghost was looking for her place of eternal rest, and she decided to put it there herself!”

“Huh...”

“Oh, Kujou, are you feeling bored? In that case, let’s get on to the main attraction! Ta-dah! Take a look at this! I found the countess’ necklace, the ‘Poison Flower’!”

Kazuya rubbed his eyes at the sight of the purple necklace in Avril’s hand, a look of shock slowly spreading across his face. “Avril, wh-wh-where did you find this?!”

“It was underneath an uneven section of floor in the hallway. I’m sure that her ghost must’ve accidentally dropped it there when she was on one of her walks. I mean, she is missing her head, you know.”

“Um... If it was underneath the floor, wouldn’t that mean someone deliberately hid it there rather than just dropped it? You know what, Avril, I saw that necklace on a list Inspector de Blois showed me earlier, of items stolen by Cuiaran—”

“Kujou!” Avril jumped enthusiastically to her feet.

Kazuya stood up from the bench with her. “Wh-what?”

“Let’s go to the Sealed Reading Room!”

“The reading room? But shouldn’t we go see the inspector fir—”

“I want to go look for Countess Ashenden’s portrait right now. If her ghost dropped the necklace while she was wandering around, then it should be missing from her neck on the portrait. And that’ll be the proof that her ghost came out from the picture to go roaming about. Let’s go!”

“Avril! But what about—” ...the inspector, the list, and Cuiaran, Kazuya wanted to say. But Avril was already running gleefully toward the main building, dragging

him along with her.

four

[4]

The large black doors of the Sealed Reading Room were already wide open, allowing the sound of a sweet and timorous voice to trickle outside. “Um, uh, excuse me, please listen to what I’m saying. I, I found—”

Miss Cécile stood squarely in the middle of the room, her petite body shaking from side to side. In front of her were two young men wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps, their hands permanently joined in an affectionate clasp. The two men—the deputies of Inspector Gréville de Blois—exchanged a look with each other.

“This room has been locked for years, and all this time no one’s gone inside. When I came in earlier, the floor was covered in dust, and I didn’t see any footprints. But even though it’s been sealed shut, I found this....” Miss Cécile pointed at the wall, her face dissolving into tears.

At that very moment, Avril arrived at the door, still pulling Kazuya along with her. “Lucky us, the door’s already open! I wonder why?”

“Not much of a ‘sealed reading room’ then, is it....”

“Kujou, look! There’s that portrait—huh?” Avril flew into the room, her eyes gleaming with excitement as she eagerly pointed at the wall. And then her eyes widened into saucers when her gaze met that of Miss Cécile, who was standing in the same position as she was, also with her finger pointed at the wall. “What’s this?”

Miss Cécile looked back at Avril with tear-filled eyes.

“Hmm?” Kazuya looked up at the wall. There was only one painting on display. He had expected to find the beautiful and yet sinister portrait of the serial poisoning countess ... but instead, he saw...

A clear blue sea and a radiant sun.

It was the picturesque scenery of an island in the South Atlantic.

Kazuya, Avril, Miss Cécile, and the two deputies simultaneously looked at one another in silent shock.

Then Avril began to shriek hysterically and wave around the necklace that was still clutched in her fist. “What happened to Countess Ashenden’s portrait?!”

Miss Cécile clasped her hands together. “It, it disappeared!”

“It disappeared?!”

“This morning, when I came to look for an answer key—uh, never mind about that. Anyway, I came here to perform a certain important task, and I found that Countess Ashenden’s portrait was gone, and someone had replaced it with this weird painting of the ocean. But no one’s been in here for ages....”

His mouth open in shock, Kazuya stared up at the so-called “weird painting of the ocean”. With the only reaction of the two deputies being simply to jeer at the painting—“What a weird painting! It looks like something a kid drew!”—he seemed to be the only one with an inkling of what this piece of artwork really was.

Avril’s face abruptly turned serious. “Well... I think it looks marvelous.”

Miss Cécile put her head in her hands. “I wonder what happened?” she murmured. “Why would someone switch the paintings, and how did they do that? It’s not as if that portrait was of any value. Although no one quite knows how long it’s been there either....”

“It’s a curse!” interjected Avril.

“A curse?! That’s scary!”

“It’s cursed!”

Avril’s words sent Miss Cécile into a panic, which in turn startled Kazuya. Once he recovered from his start of surprise, he timidly approached the two deputies. “Um, excuse me, sirs...”

At that point, they were already preparing to flee the reading room, and had made a 180-degree turn without letting go of each others’ hands. Evidently, they had no desire whatsoever to investigate the situation. But they hesitated at the

sound of Kazuya's voice, and both turned to face him, inclining their heads at the same time. "What is it?"

"Right before I came here, Inspector de Blois showed me the list of items stolen by Cuiaran, and..." Kazuya pointed at the painting of the ocean. "This was on the list. It was the last work of some famous painter, titled 'South Atlantic' if I remember correctly."

"Really?!"

"Well, I wouldn't have any idea how it ended up here. And this girl found a necklace that was also on the list. A necklace by the name of 'Poison Flower'...."

The two deputies exchanged a look.

Then they each took a deep breath, and yelled, "Inspecto-o-o-r!"

"—o-o-o-r!"

Holding hands tightly, they ran down the corridor, shouting all the way.

The three people left behind in the reading room stood dumbfounded for a moment.

Then Avril, who was staring at the painting, suddenly whispered forlornly, "So this is a picture of the South Atlantic sea..." The slightest trace of a shadow clouded her normally vivacious blue eyes. She slowly walked out of the reading room into the hallway.

When Kazuya turned to look at her, he detected an unusual loneliness in the line of her slumped shoulders. Starting to feel slightly concerned, he quietly followed her.

Avril left the building and walked through the school gardens in a daze. She wandered to the edge of a fountain, and sat down beside it. When she noticed Kazuya following her with a worried expression, she gave him a wan smile.

"What's wrong, Avril?"

"Yeah. It's just that..." She absentmindedly ran her fingers along the ledge. "About that postcard that you returned to me, the last letter from my

grandfather, Sir Bradley. He was a famous explorer, you know.”

“I’ve heard of him. There were newspaper articles about him in my country, too.”

“Really?”

Kazuya nodded.

Avril’s grandfather, Sir Bradley, had been a famous adventurer. And the reason she had been targeted by the thief Cuiaran was because of the heirloom he had bequeathed to her....

A warm expression lit up Avril’s face. “My grandpa was full of life, always itching for a new adventure. Every boy in the world loved to tell stories about his travels. But the rest of my family treated him as an eccentric. My papa was sickly from birth, the exact opposite of my grandpa. So he was overjoyed when I was born full of life, and always used to tell me I took after grandpa, and always encouraged me to become a fabulous explorer like him when I grew up. But then my grandma would poke me so hard that it felt like she was taking a few years off my life, and say she wanted to turn me into an elegant lady instead.”

“Huh...”

“And being able to come study in Sauvure was thanks to my papa, too. He said that he wanted me to broaden my horizons. So now...”

Kazuya nodded solemnly and leaned forward, sensing that Avril was about to get to the point of her story. After all, this was the first time he heard her talk about something unrelated to ghost stories. He had a strong hunch that if he let this opportunity slip by, he would perhaps never get to hear her talk about such things ever again.

A moment later, they heard the sound of quickly approaching footsteps. They looked up, wondering who it was, only to see the two deputies, wearing their rabbit-skin hunting caps and holding hands, headed their way.

The two men let go of each others’ hands, and each grabbed hold of one of Kazuya’s hands, sandwiching him between them.

“Huh?” Kazuya felt his feet lift off the ground. “Wh-what’s going on?”

“Inspector de Blois wants to see you!”

“He said to bring you right away!”

“B-bring me where?”

“To the library!”

As the deputies dragged Kazuya away like a prisoner with both hands bound, he belatedly looked over his shoulder and called out, “See you later, Avril! I’ll be back soo—”

“Ha-ha! Not that soon!”

Kazuya kept looking back as they pulled him along to the library....

five

[5]

Once they arrived at St. Marguerite's Library, that sanctuary of knowledge and silence, its ash-grey stone walls weathered by the passage of hundreds of years....

The two deputies kicked open the library's leather-covered swing door and unceremoniously threw Kazuya inside the atrium. "I have to climb this staircase again?!" he yelled in protest. "Once in a day is quite enough as far as I'm concerned. Hey, are you listening to me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now climb it!"

Kazuya sighed, then steeled himself and looked up at the distant top of the atrium. The interior of the library was held together not by walls, but by giant bookshelves crammed full of leather-bound books. Kazuya felt as if they were looking down and groaning at the sight of him, sick of him coming time after time.

A narrow wooden staircase zigzagged nearly all the way to the ceiling, which featured a solemn religious fresco. The intricate labyrinth of dry wood resembled an enormous dinosaur bone that someone had unearthed.

Kazuya took one step up the stairs.

Then another step, and another.

I guess I have no choice.... Well, it's not like Inspector de Blois will be the only one up there; Victorique should be there, too....

When the thought of Victorique entered his mind, somehow the pace of his footsteps began to gradually quicken.

Still, that Victorique... That funny, moody, mean, strange little girl... Jeez, she's such an unpleasant person, and her attitude toward me is completely unacceptable....

As he continued to think about her, Kazuya's climbing became more and more energetic, and soon enough he was running up the staircase.

At the very top of the maze of stairs...

When Kazuya reached the conservatory overgrown with tropical trees, gently illuminated by skylights, he was once again met by the sight of a man with a golden drill on top of his head. Inspector Gréville de Blois had been waiting impatiently, whiling away the time by restlessly pulling on leaves. The moment he spotted Kazuya, he struck one of his poses, and called out to him loudly.

"Kujou! The worthless portrait of that murderous Countess Ashenden disappeared from the Sealed Reading Room, and was replaced underneath our noses with a famous painting, the 'South Atlantic'!"

"Um, I know that already. I was there when it was discovered," said Kazuya, trying to catch his breath.

"And the necklace that belonged to that countess, the 'Poison Flower,' was found hidden underneath some floorboards! What the devil is going on here?"

Kazuya grimaced at the inspector's earsplitting shout. He promptly brushed past him and entered the gardens, searching for Victorique's small form.

He found her sitting down in the same position he had seen her in last time, hunched over into a ball and busily gardening.

"Victorique... Oh no, you've gotten all muddy again! For goodness' sake, why do you have to keep doing this? Ruining your pretty dress like that..."

While grumbling disapprovingly, Kazuya once again filled a bucket of water, grabbed Victorique's small hands, and forcefully washed the dirt from them. Her face twisted into a child's petulant scowl, but she nevertheless obediently allowed him to wash her.

The inspector raised his voice in annoyance from behind Kazuya, who was continuing to mumble complaints under his breath. "K-Kujou, won't you listen to what I have to say...?"

"Huh? About what?"

Kazuya and Victorique both raised their faces from the bucket to look up at him.

The inspector's drill glinted golden among the colorful foliage of tropical flowers.

Victorique stared at him for a moment, her mouth hanging open. Then she slowly parted her glossy, cherry-red lips and uttered a single, unexpected word.

"...Unicorn."

"Huh? Oh, I get it. You're right, it kind of looks like that from a certain angle. You're pretty sharp, aren't you, Victorique! Hey, wait... Inspector, why is your face so red? Don't tell me you're angry?"

Inspector de Blois glared at Victorique, his lips trembling and his cheeks a deep scarlet. Kazuya looked back and forth between the two of them, wondering what had gotten the inspector so angry.

"...For you of all people to say that, when you're the one who designed it in the first place!" Inspector de Blois said softly.

"What did you say, inspector?"

"Uh, n-nothing!"

Taking advantage of Kazuya's distraction, Victorique again turned back to her gardening, dirtying her hands anew despite the effort it took to scrub them clean. Sensing Kazuya about to yell at her admonishingly, she murmured in her husky voice, perhaps in an effort to change the subject, "Kujou, aren't you going to write a reply to that letter?"

Kazuya, on the verge of an angry shout, closed his mouth, and stared dumbly at Victorique. "L-letter?" Then he connected the dots in his mind, and clapped his hands together. "That's right. I forgot that I received a letter from my second eldest brother yesterday. But Victorique... How did you know that?"

Looking thoroughly bored, Victorique opened her mouth in a huge yawn, her red currant-colored chiffon dress rustling in time with her movement. She raised a small, muddy hand to cover her mouth, leaving a smear of mud on her rosy cheek. Kazuya quickly took out his handkerchief to wipe her face. Victorique

tried to slap his handkerchief away with both of her hands, as if batting away a noisy fly.

“That sort of thing is nothing at all. It’s too simple to even require the use of my overflowing wellspring of wisdom. I just happened to see your letter peeking out of your breast pocket.”

Kazuya immediately looked down at his pocket. Sure enough, he had placed the letter inside when he left his dormitory room this morning.

“You deliberately took the letter with you because you planned to read it, or perhaps were hesitating on what to write in reply. I have reconstructed the fragments of chaos thusly. In other words, Kujou, the contents of that letter were bothering you in some way.”

Kazuya whistled in admiration. “Victorique, you may be weird, but you’re awfully smart!”

“Mmm?!”

“It’s just like you said. You know what, to tell you the truth, this letter from my brother has been tormenting me ever since I received it last night. I can’t seem to get it out of my mind....”

“No more hemming and hawing, just let me see it.”

Kazuya pulled the letter from his breast pocket.

A voice of objection came from the golden drill peeking at them from under the shade of the palm trees. “Hey, I was here first! That’s not fair!”

“...The unicorn is angry,” said Kazuya.

“Let him be. Now hurry up and open it.”

“O-okay...”

Kazuya opened the envelope and handed it to Victorique. She accepted it with an inquisitive grunt, then began to read it.

The letter was written in slightly broken English. Kazuya’s second eldest brother spent his free time engaged in his hobby of creating inventions, but was also employed in a government-related job, and was highly respected in the

community. He had apparently challenged himself to practice writing letters in English. The contents consisted of a simple report of recent events: the family was doing well, a tree in the garden had died, this year's winter had been quite a harsh one, and other such innocuous topics.

He ended the letter with a clumsily drawn picture of what looked like a rose, and beneath it, another picture of a woman. Next to the drawing, he had written "It's a secret!" in small print.

Kazuya peered closely into Victorique's small face, thinking to himself that even she, for all of her smarts, would never be able to figure out the meaning of this picture and the message. But as soon as this thought had crossed his mind, she abruptly giggled.

Kazuya was so shocked that he jumped into the air. Victorique, who always had an insult at the ready and whose expression never showed an ounce of warmth, had suddenly smiled. Her face was startlingly adorable, and Kazuya felt his heartbeat quicken at the sight of it.

"Wh-what happened?"

"Mmm? Oh, just that your second eldest brother or whoever he is amused me a little."

"Was there something funny?" Kazuya examined the letter, reading it over several times. Finally, he shook his head, still stumped. "Hey, what do you mean? Is it the picture that made you laugh? I couldn't get what it means at all. What the heck is this 'secret' he's talking about?"

Victorique pursed her smooth, cherry-red lips, then moved close to Kazuya's ear, as if about to share something private with him. He blushed slightly at the sensation of her cool breath tickling his ear. But Victorique paid no mind to his reaction, and whispered to him in a low, husky voice.

"Your brother has a secret lover."

"What?! A lover!?" screeched Kazuya.

"Right. And the only one he wanted to tell was his little brother, who lives far away."

“My big brother has a lover?! I don’t believe it! But he wears glasses, and spends all his time with his inventions! That is, when he isn’t eating!”

Kazuya grabbed the letter and brought it close to his face, then held it out at arms’ length, reading it over and over many times. But he still saw nothing remotely related to what she had said.

Giving up, he looked over at Victorique and quietly waited for her explanation.

A breeze flowed in from the skylights, audibly stirring the palm fronds.

Victorique had turned herself completely over to gardening, seeming to have forgotten about Kazuya. After some time had passed, she at last appeared to feel satisfied with her work, and plunged her small hands into the bucket to wash them. When her hands were clean, she looked up at Kazuya. “Give me your handkerchief.”

“...Okay, but I want you to give me an explanation, Victorique.”

“An explanation?” Victorique gave him a mystified look. As she wiped her small hands with Kazuya’s proffered handkerchief, she asked wonderingly, “Of what?”

“That secret lover!”

“Oh... So you still don’t understand. You really are a slow one. Every day must be a struggle for you.”

“Leave me out of this! Hurry up and explain it!”

Victorique sighed heavily in exasperation. “Do I have to?”

“Yes!”

She resignedly began to explain. “Ugh... First of all, that letter was written in English. And a woman’s picture was drawn underneath the rose. Incidentally, in English the phrase ‘sub rosa’ — ‘under the rose’ — is used to mean ‘in secret’.”

“Wow...”

“That’s right. So, from this we can assume that your brother has a secret girlfriend, and that this is to be kept strictly confidential. I suppose it would be embarrassing to him. ...Do you finally understand now?”

Kazuya nodded admiringly. “I got it. But Victorique... You sure figured that one

out in no time, huh?”

“Excuse me?!”

Kazuya had only meant to praise her, but for some reason Victorique suddenly scowled as if he had just said something very rude, and began to fiercely object. “K-Kujou. Who on earth do you think you’re talking to here? There is nothing I don’t know. This sort of puzzle doesn’t even deserve to be called a mystery.”

“Oh...?” Kazuya stared dumbfounded at Victorique, who had suddenly become incensed, staining her rosy cheeks scarlet. Then he added offhandedly, “That reminds me: my brother always loved solving puzzles. Well, he may be very bashful around women, and would even fall into a faint whenever his little sister—I mean my big sister—gave him a hug. But he’s still very smart. At university, he was so brilliant at math that he won the respect of his professors. And his hobby is inventing things. I remember how he used to boast that if it weren’t for his job, he could defeat anyone in the world when it came to solving puzzles. Ha-ha!”

“...What did you say?” Victorique’s finely shaped eyebrows shot upwards upon hearing his innocently uttered words.

Kazuya was taken aback. “V-Victorique...? Hey, what’s wrong?”

“How dare the brother of the likes of *you* claim to be the best in the world at anything!”

“It’s not like I have anything to do with it! Hey...?!”

Victorique shook her fists violently. Then she suddenly uttered a strange cry, sounding somewhat like a cross between a snort and a sneeze, and rolled on the ground out of the conservatory. Her frilly petticoats and billowing drawers fluttered before Kazuya’s astonished gaze for an instant.

“Wh-where did you go...? Oh, never mind. You’re back already.”

The ball of redcurrant-colored chiffon again rolled back to Kazuya’s feet. During her brief moment out of his sight, she had somehow managed to gather up writing paper, a quill pen, and an ink bottle without him noticing it.

Kazuya watched over her carefully, wondering what on earth she was up to

this time. Then Victorique, her face completely flushed, spread the writing paper out on the floor and began to draw a white horse.

“...Are you doodling?”

Victorique ignored him.

“Jeez. You’re always so impulsive. What’s that? Drawing a horsey? Ha-ha, you’re doing a lousy job of it... Ouch! Don’t pinch me! Ack, that’s going to leave a mark!”

“I am not doodling. I am issuing a challenge to that stupid Kujou sibling across the seas.”

“He isn’t stupid. I might be, but he definitely isn’t. ...Huh, a challenge?” Kazuya blinked in surprise.

And then he took a closer look at Victorique’s drawing.

She had drawn a white horse running along a hilly landscape. The scene looked familiar. Kazuya recalled reading about a famous tourist attraction in the county of Berkshire in England of an enormous figure of a [white horse](#) that had been carved into a hill in prehistoric times.

“Hmm... And what about this one?” He turned to look at another picture that Victorique had drawn. It was a comical drawing of a donkey, albeit a very unskillfully drawn one. “What’s this one for? Huh? Are you writing something on it, too?”

“Shut up. Don’t bother me.”

“C-come on, I wasn’t bothering you!”

But Victorique was fully engrossed in her work, and offered no reaction to Kazuya’s denials. Beneath her sketches, she was composing a message in elegantly handwritten English.

Kazuya read it aloud. “Let’s see.... ‘Rearrange this poorly-drawn donkey so that it turns into this beautiful white horse. Do it in under five minutes. This is an order. From Victorique.’ ...Really, is this supposed to be a puzzle? Well, okay, but if you write ‘from Victorique,’ he isn’t going to know who you are. ...What, why are you glaring at me like that? Tch... Fine, fine.”

Kazuya quickly gave in. He took the paper from Victorique and wrote a message in the corner. *There's nothing new to report on my end, thanks for informing me about the "sub rosa" matter, and also, I made friends with a little girl, and that girl is very smart and for some reason wants to give you a quiz, and I don't really get it myself, but I'm forwarding it to you anyway, etc....*

Victorique nodded in satisfaction, her mood finally seeming to have improved.

Kazuya thought privately to himself: *She's awfully childish. I guess she really hates to lose....* and sighed in dismay.

Victorique, now completely calmed down, sat down gracefully, looking for all like a noblewoman despite her tiny size. With slow and deliberate movements, she lifted up her white ceramic pipe, lit the fire, and brought it to her small lips to take a puff.

Then she suddenly spoke. "So, about that portrait of Countess Ashenden."

"You remembered!" shouted Inspector de Blois, poking his drill in their direction.

The sunlight that illuminated the conservatory had grown brighter, shining radiantly upon the lush vegetation. A springtime breeze gently seeped in from the skylights, rustling through tree leaves and flower petals alike.

A thin white tendril of smoke weaved its way up toward the ceiling from the ceramic pipe hanging out of Victorique's mouth.

Kazuya stood amiably beside the inspector, awaiting Victorique's next words with bated breath.

"Kujou, do you know Latin?"

"Not really."

Inspector de Blois also grimaced and shook his drill in negation.

"'Pentimento' is a word in Latin that, literally translated, means 'to regret'. Of course, Latin is no longer a language used for everyday conversation. And it's rare that this word is ever used in the sense of its original meaning. Even so, words can live on indefinitely by taking on new meanings. I suppose that even if

roses themselves happened to disappear from the face of the earth for whatever reason, the expression 'sub rosa' may still survive. You could think of it as a descendant of the rose. And so the same is true in this case."

"...Wh-what do you mean?"

"The Latin word 'pentimento' lives on today as a specialized term used in the fine arts. It refers to the action a painter takes when he regrets something he has painted. You see, a painter may feel like creating a new painting atop the canvas of the original one, in case that one was a failure. Or in case he wants to hide the original."

Victorique removed the pipe from her lips, then slowly, languidly, turned to Kazuya.

Like one entranced, Kazuya stared into her light green eyes, which were hazy with a deep weariness, the likes of which he had never encountered before meeting her. Her eyes were devoid of emotion, as if they belonged to a completely different person from the one whose face had earlier been flushed with childish anger. Those motionless green eyes could have been mistaken for the glass eyes of some extinct animal stuffed and put on display. They possessed a negative charge, powerful enough to send shivers down the spine of anyone who looked at them. And yet Kazuya could not tear his eyes away from them. He felt as if he was being stared down by some huge, ferocious animal.

Victorique went on with her explanation. "After many years, the colors of the work that the artist painted on top fade and disappear. And then, one day, the original painting is revealed. This phenomenon is called '[pentimento](#)'."

Kazuya exchanged surprised looks with the inspector. "So then, what you're saying is...?"

"The painting that hung on the wall of the Sealed Reading Room was never switched out. Long ago, someone tried to hide 'South Atlantic,' and painted an amateurish portrait on top of it. But when the paint faded, the original masterpiece once again became visible."

"Wh-who did that?"

Victorique shot Kazuya a withering look. Then she snorted through her small,

shapely nose, and continued in her usual unbearably haughty manner.

“...Shouldn’t it be obvious by now that it was Cuiaran who did it? The same Cuiaran who stole the ‘South Atlantic’ and Countess Ashenden’s ‘Poison Flower.’ When he came here to hide the painting, he thought of painting something else on top of it. And then he remembered the original owner of the necklace that he had also come to hide, and ended up drawing that portrait of her. And that is the secret of who hung that portrait in the reading room, and when it was placed there.”

Silence fell upon the conservatory.

Intense rays of sunlight blazed through the skylights as a mellow springtime breeze lightly ruffled through palm fronds.

A thin white trail of smoke rose from Victorique’s ceramic pipe and swayed lazily in midair.

For several moments, no one said a word. Kazuya could do nothing but gaze speechlessly at Victorique’s small and lovely face while she sat in impassive silence.

Inspector de Blois, who was the most shocked out of anyone in the room, at last collected his wits together. “Well, now. I guess I should be going.” He slowly turned away from the conservatory and walked to the hydraulic elevator with such brisk steps that he might as well have been trying to flee the scene.

Kazuya jolted back to awareness, and shouted after him reproachfully. “Inspector! Are you going to use Victorique for her intelligence yet again, then just ignore her and leave? You should take this opportunity to thank her. Inspector, inspector!”

“...What are you talking about? I merely came here to have a chat with you, Kujou,” said the inspector, mumbling an excuse that Kazuya had already heard him use before. He jumped into the iron cage of the elevator and shut the black metal doors.

“...Gréville.” Victorique suddenly uttered his name aloud in her husky voice.

The inspector's shoulders twitched, and he looked up to the ceiling while taking peeks at her from the corner of his eye. "Wh-what do you want? I'm busy here. I have to go search for all of the loot that Cuiaran hid inside this school. Well, then, I must be off."

"You may search as much as you like, but unfortunately for you, this is one thing you're never going to find, Gréville."

Victorique produced a small bag out of nowhere and threw it at the inspector, swinging her arm dramatically. But the bag refused to fly more than a meter away from where she was standing, and instead fell limply to the ground. Kazuya dutifully retrieved it, and walked over to hand it to the inspector.

It was a small bag embroidered with a floral pattern. The inspector stared at it blankly for a moment, then suddenly gave a shout. He pulled out the list of items stolen by Cuiaran and scanned it, looking back and forth between the list and the bag. Kazuya also leaned in for a peek.

On the list was a drawing of a cloth bag that looked exactly like the one that Victorique had just thrown to him. It contained the seed of a rare flower that a famous botanist had discovered in the rainforests of South America.

The inspector hastily opened the bag and peered inside. Then he turned it upside down and shook it.

But nothing came out.

"It's empty!" he shrieked.

Then he turned to the enigmatic, beautiful young girl who was still standing in the center of the conservatory, gazing at him fixedly with her green eyes.

"What happened to the seed?!"

"...I ate it."

"Y-y-y-you ate it!? Are you a squirrel?! Tell me you're lying!"

"It's the truth. It was quite delicious, too. As you know, my greatest enemy is tedium. From time to time I like to surprise myself with new and unusual things to eat."

Victorique said no more. She gave a nod of satisfaction, then promptly turned

her back to him. The white strand of smoke from her pipe swayed almost imperceptibly, as if she were suppressing laughter....

The iron cage of the elevator descended with a harsh metallic clang.

Kazuya had been nervously looking back and forth between Victorique and the inspector during their exchange. Now, as the iron cage dropped below the floor, he thought he saw the inspector's face contort in frustration, right before disappearing from view.

Kazuya scrambled back to the conservatory. "Did you really eat it? Something as valuable as that? And it didn't give you a stomachache?"

Victorique chose not to look at him, merely acknowledging him with a snort through her dainty nose.

Kazuya, still taken aback by what he had just seen, was briefly silent, then finally burst out laughing. "You should've seen the look on his face!"

"Kujou... You like pretty flowers, don't you?"

"Flowers?" Kazuya repeated, nonplussed. Then he thought for a moment. "Yeah, I do. In my home country, my mother used to tend our garden. Different kinds of flowers would bloom depending on the time of year, and they looked really pretty. But the ones in this conservatory are nice, too. How about you?"

Victorique's only response was another snort.

Kazuya gave her a perplexed look, uncertain of where this sudden turn of conversation was headed. Then he fell silent, and began worrying whether his presence was bothering Victorique. *If the case has been solved, then I guess there's no more reason for me to keep coming here....*

Victorique continued to ignore him, and returned to reading her books. She flipped through the pages of the many books she was reading simultaneously with tremendous speed.

Although he could not quite understand why, Kazuya felt loath to part from this peculiar little girl. *It's not like I have any reason to keep climbing that ghastly staircase every day. I may never see this strange girl ever again.... The*

thought of it makes me feel kind of lonely. But...

Victorique, by all appearances engrossed in her books, spoke without moving her gaze from them. “Kujou. In around ten days. It might happen then.”

“Okay? ...Hey, what’s wrong? Your face is a little red.”

“N-n-no, it isn’t! It might happen in ten days!”

“It is, though.... What might happen in ten days?”

“Well... You can come back then.”

Kazuya was momentarily stunned. Then his face brightened in a flash. “Can I really?!”

“...You can come in ten days, and then go look over there.”

“Over there?” Kazuya stared curiously in the direction she was pointing—around the area where she had been digging in the dirt all morning.

Victorique took a drag from her pipe. “In around ten days, a rare tropical flower will bloom in that spot. You can come see it.”

“...Oh, so that’s what it was! Victorique, you were planting it, weren’t you!”

“Well, you see, I hadn’t realized. When the seed fell out of the bag, I planted it. And then I found out it was on that list....”

Victorique blushed, then flapped her small, outstretched hands. Kazuya stared in astonishment at the sight of her fumbling for excuses, lost in a self-imposed panic. At last she fell silent, and placed her palms on her red cheeks.

A gentle wind blew, vibrating the palm fronds and causing the line of smoke from Victorique’s pipe to flicker.

Kazuya felt delight begin to well up inside of him. “Then it’s okay if I come back here? I’m not going to be too noisy and bother you?”

Victorique gave no reply aside from a snort. Then, through the corner of her eye, she looked at Kazuya, whose grin was growing ever bigger. She frowned in irritation, and opened her mouth as if she had something to say.

But for some reason, the usual stinging insults that she uttered in her husky voice did not come forth from her glossy, cherry-red lips. She closed her mouth,

and gave another snort.

A breeze from the skylights lingered upon Victorique's lustrous blond hair, which draped down her back like a velvet turban come undone. The palm fronds murmured softly.

Kazuya turned away from her, preparing to leave the conservatory. He placed his hand on the ivy-etched railing of the labyrinthine staircase, then looked back once more. For a moment, a scene flashed before his eyes as if in a daydream.

The library tower, shrouded in grey. One day, in that marvelous conservatory on the very top floor, the seed of an exotic foreign plant would bud and bloom into a luminous flower. As the flower swayed in the breeze from the skylights, the enigmatic little girl Victorique, herself like a marvelous foreign flower, would admire it. And Kazuya would sit nestled by her side....

Like a secret gardener watching over an unusual flower, Kazuya simply watched Victorique, who sat amidst her sumptuous frills, like colorful scattered petals. Up until now, she had been sitting in the conservatory, stubbornly ignoring him. But as Kazuya continued to stare at her in a daze, transfixed by a moment's vision, Victorique lifted up her head slightly. Their eyes met.

Kazuya held his breath, and merely gazed at her with heat in his eyes. Victorique stared back at him wonderingly. The two of them stayed silent for what felt like an eternity, until finally Victorique whispered in a voice as husky as that of an old woman, mixed with a sigh of unbearable tedium.

"I will always be right here. If ever you have something to say, then just climb up that labyrinth of stairs and tell me!"

six

[6]

A warm spring breeze drifted through the school grounds, stirring the blooming flowers in their beds, and the blades of grass on the green lawn.

Kazuya walked along the white pebbled path leading from the library until reaching the front of the school building. He arrived just in time to see Inspector de Blois' two deputies confiscating Cuiaran's two stolen works of art as evidence, with one of them carrying away Countess Ashenden's necklace, the "Poison Flower," and the other one hoisting the famous painting, the "South Atlantic," off the premises.

Avril Bradley, the transfer student from England, sorrowfully watched them go. Kazuya carefully approached from behind her, and noticed that she was gazing not at the sparkling necklace, but at the large painting. "I always thought girls preferred jewels over artwork," he called out to her.

Avril turned around, startled. When she saw Kazuya, she smiled at him, then stretched out a long, lissome arm and pointed at the painting. "That painting is supposed to be of the South Atlantic sea, right? It's lovely! You know, my grandpa passed away."

"Oh..." Kazuya, walking alongside Avril, bowed his head. He had read about Sir Bradley's death in the newspaper while he was still in his home country. The famed explorer, on a certain day in his sixtieth year, had gotten in a hot air balloon.... Yes, and then...

"He set out to make a trans-Atlantic crossing by hot air balloon, but he ended up disappearing over the open sea. Everyone said he was being foolhardy and that he must have been going senile.... But when I look at that painting, all I can think of is how unbearably lovely that sea is."

Avril smiled sadly, tears beginning to collect in her large blue eyes. Kazuya hastily searched for his handkerchief, and offered it to Avril. She wiped her tears and blew her nose into it, then handed it back to him.

“His hot air balloon disappeared into the ocean, but I’m certain that the last sight my grandpa ever got to see was that beautiful blue sea, just like a peek into paradise. I feel that in my heart.” She giggled self-consciously.

“Avril...” *I’ll have to wash that later*, thought Kazuya silently as he returned the handkerchief to his back pocket.

A fresh, sweet scent wafted from beds of blossoming flowers. The gravel path beneath their feet made a faint crunching sound with each step of their shoes.

Avril’s face lit up in a clear and unclouded smile, like a flower unfurling its petals. “I wish I could go on adventures to the ends of the earth, just like my grandpa did. Say, I bet the country you come from is a wonderful place, too. I’d like to visit someday!”

“Wow... That’s the first time anyone’s ever told me that. Everyone here seems to think countries overseas are all dreadfully barbaric. Just look at how they even had to nickname me the Grim Reaper.”

“Really?”

“Wait, you didn’t know that yet? ...Oops.”

Avril giggled at his dismayed expression. “They probably feel uncomfortable with anything that’s unfamiliar. That’s especially the case with the girls here who come from noble families. But I love learning about unfamiliar lands and unfamiliar cultures. I’m sure there are all sorts of exciting discoveries to be made there. I think the world beyond Europe must be a fantastic place.”

As Kazuya walked with Avril, thoughts of another girl arose in his mind. A girl from a noble family, as Avril had said....

“Kujou, I hope someday...”

That tiny, strange girl, always with an insult at the ready, who never set foot outside of the wondrous conservatory at the top floor of the library, much less outside of Sauvure; that girl, like an enigmatic flower....

“I hope someday I can go far, far away....”

Victorique....

Engulfed in sumptuous dresses as exquisite as flower petals, and yet

possessing such a fearsome intellect.... Victorique...

“Are you listening, Kujou?”

“...Huh? Oh, yeah.” Kazuya snapped back to reality.

Avril shot a perturbed frown at Kazuya, who had been staring into space absentmindedly. But at last, the smile returned to her face once more.

The wind blew a little more strongly.

A springtime’s breeze, still tinged with cold...

Rays of mellow sunlight fell upon the school grounds, and gently shimmered upon Kazuya’s black hair as he stood still....

A few weeks later, Avril Bradley, the transfer student and ghost story enthusiast extraordinaire, would tell Kazuya Kujou of the mystery of the ghost ship Queen Berry. He and Victorique would end up entangled in a great adventure revolving around the strange incidents taking place on board that ship.

And in their second adventure, they would come to visit the isolated mountain sanctuary known as the “Nameless Village,” and learn the secrets of Victorique’s past.

In their third adventure, Kazuya would be entangled into a mass disappearance case of people who vanished into the darkness in the capital of Sauvure....

Victorique and Kazuya would end up overcoming various perils together over the next several months.

And then, with their hearts borne aloft on the winds, the seasons around them at last shift from spring to summer.

They would spend a long holiday in the school.

And on the first day of that summer, Kazuya would receive a letter from his second eldest brother. It would feature an answer to Victorique’s puzzle of the pony, and include a challenge from him to her in the form of a new puzzle. The

summer memories of Victorique and Kazuya, and of another girl, intertwine....

But that is, once again, an entirely different story....

one

prelude — the grim reaper discovers a golden flower

[1]

Winter 1922—

The setting sun cast a dark shadow on the the plate-glass windows of a timeworn castle, veiled by curtains of Gobelins tapestry.

The pale moon rising in the western sky highlighted the features of this fortress shaped like a huge lump of stone—Castle de Blois. The sharply-outlined silhouette of the tall spire, with its overhanging window and elegant entrance, resembled an enormous woodblock print composed only in black and white.

The winters of Western Europe are cold. And how much more so if spent in an ancient stone castle, towering deep in the forest for centuries on end...

The gardens that ringed the perimeter of the castle had been skillfully maintained by master gardeners summoned from the capital of Sauvrière. But now, in the dead of winter, they were merely a wan shadow of their former glory, fringed by the coppery brown branches of beech trees and bare rose bushes quaking unsteadily in the snow, swallowed up by the bleak twilight.

The chill of winter spread throughout the approaching darkness.

Groups of young maids, dressed in uniforms of white and dark blue, elderly butlers standing at attention, young male servants in dapper uniforms, and heavysset cooks came scrambling out of the castle and stood in a line, all looking up at the same spot. They clasped their hands to their chests and huddled together shoulder to shoulder, in fear of what they saw.

Various legends had circulated in speculation of what exactly was contained in the dark recesses of the tapered, eerie-looking tower at Castle de Blois. Over the course of the castle's long history, that tower had been implicated in many tragedies, atrocities, and conspiracies that had taken place during periods of conflict in medieval times.

Everyone was now staring up at the spire, their breath stifled, their faces taut.

Their eyes were fixed upon something being carefully lowered onto a large carriage waiting below.

A box, looking much like a cage.

No—it was indeed a cage.

That bulky object, draped with a Persian rug the color of cream dappled with green, was slowly descending from the top of the tower. It seemed to be carrying a wild animal, for it periodically emitted a low moaning cry—*ow-ooo!*

A wintry gust of wind blew flakes of snow.

The box swung wildly from side to side, causing the masses of servants who had been gazing up at it to simultaneously take a cringing step backward.

Ow-ooo...

Ow-oooooo...

The beast let out a mournful wail from inside the cage, shrouded by the Persian rug. Each time it was rattled by the piercingly cold wind, the animal inside howled sorrowfully, wretchedly at the night sky.

“Oh!”

A young lady-in-waiting, her cheeks still round and rosy, could contain herself no more, and darted toward the wildly-swaying cage.

But a plump middle-aged chambermaid threw her arms around her and held her in place. “You mustn’t. That thing is out of your hands now.”

“But...”

“It’s over now.” The chambermaid’s large, fleshy body trembled as she spoke.

An elderly butler approached them, a frown deepening the wrinkles on his brow. “That thing will soon be on its way. Don’t do anything rash.”

“But...!”

“That beast will be gone from here. Soon we shall live in peace and quiet again.”

The other servants nodded in agreement with the butler's words. The lady-in-waiting turned to look at the cage, her face crumpling, holding back tears.

The cage landed on a platform attached to the large, black carriage. This time, the creature inside the cage did not cry out, perhaps frightened by the sudden jolt.

The coachman gave a nod, his face twitching in fear.

He cracked his black whip, and the imposing, dark-colored horses responded with a shrill whinny. With a startled kick of their forelegs, they burst into a run down the gravel road.

The large black carriage, carrying the ominous-looking cage, withdrew from Castle de Blois and disappeared into the forest....

The assembled servants breathed a sigh of relief, then departed the garden one by one to go back to their various posts. The chambermaid affectionately thumped the lady-in-waiting's shoulder, and walked off.

The girl lingered alone in the garden. "Why...?" she whispered softly.

And then she too walked slowly away, returning to her assigned place. From tonight, she would be starting in a new position, and could not neglect her duties. There was no time to wallow in her grief. She was responsible for supporting her young brothers and sisters, and had no choice but to work.

"But..."

She slowed to a halt, and looked up at the tapered, menacing spire, now devoid of any living soul.

And she thought of those days when she was tasked with delivering three certain things to the room at the top of that tower....

The girl started to walk again. "That grey wolf was human...." she murmured to herself.

A wintry gale blew past.

Snowflakes swirled into the air, swallowing up her whispering voice....

"A terrifying human...!"

two

[2]

At St. Marguerite's School, on a morning in the dead of winter...

It was the morning after that night in the desolate garden at Castle de Blois, a stone fortress that had stood surrounded by the dark forest for centuries, when an eerie-looking box had been hitched to a carriage and then vanished into the woods.

The carriage headed toward St. Marguerite's School, a distinguished institution that boasted a long history of educating the children of the aristocracy. It was located on a sprawling campus, preserved since medieval times, near a village on the gently sloping foothills of the Alps. In that school, a young teacher was sitting nervously, waiting to welcome an unusual guest.

On the first floor of the school building, built in the shape of the letter U, was a parlor lavishly furnished for the purpose of greeting noble visitors. A middle-aged man entered the room and sat upon an elegantly crafted chair, engraved with a motif of intertwining leaves, in the corner furthest away from the windows. A young woman sat down on a plain school-issued chair in front of him. The two of them faced each other silently.

The woman bore such a youthful-looking face that she could have been mistaken for one of her students. She had wide drooping brown eyes behind large round glasses, and wavy brunette hair that curled down to her shoulders.

This teacher's name was Cécile, and she had been a student at this school only a few years before. She was still young and inexperienced, but also quite popular with her students.

Her large eyes were opened wide in fear as she gazed at the man before her. He was a frightening, and yet beautiful man, the likes of whom she had never encountered before. Sitting there in a dim corner of the room, he seemed to be shrouded in a heavy darkness despite the broad daylight outside.

The man who sat on the delicately ornamented chair wore his glossy blond hair

tied into a cascade that flowed down his back like a horse's tail, tight jodhpurs, and a blouse. With a thin riding crop gripped in his hand, the Marquis de Blois appeared every inch a nobleman, living up to the rumors that surrounded him. He was a mysterious and fearsome man, powerful even by the standards of the aristocracy, influential in the government, and someone who had played an important role in the Great War.

The Marquis wore a monocle of high magnification on his right eye, disfiguring his uncommonly handsome face. The view of his green eye through the monocle, ornamented with silver, appeared strangely distorted. The lens was far too thick, making his menacing right eye appear oddly magnified next to the left one. The pupil seemed to pop out, like a ghost jumping at Cécile. As she gazed at him timorously, she could do nothing but merely sit in her chair, not daring to say a word.

"...Mademoiselle."

The intimidating nobleman at last spoke. His eye, magnified under the monocle, narrowed slightly.

"Y-yes, sir," answered Cécile in a strained voice.

"Have you ever owned any animals?"

"...Animals?" Cécile repeated, bewildered. Memories of her childhood flashed through her mind. "Let's see, I had a dog, a bird, and then a snake that I had to get rid of. It made my mama faint and she told my papa to throw it out. Also, a cat. And then, uh..."

As she counted on her fingers, she was impatiently interrupted by the marquis. "That's enough."

"Huh?"

"I want you to look after a wolf."

Cécile stared at him, dumbfounded. "A ... wolf?"

The marquis chuckled. "That's right." Behind his monocle, his green eye suddenly opened wide. "A tiny, little wolf." He handed a stack of papers to Cécile. "I'm talking about this girl."

“Oh...?” Cécile answered, still confused.

And then she took a look at the papers in her hands.

She was holding a dossier of the daughter of the Marquis de Blois, a twelve year old girl. An application for enrollment of a new student had arrived last night, and Cécile had naturally reviewed it that same night—the application of the youngest child of the House de Blois, Victorique de Blois. She had apparently never attended school in her life. But this in itself was not unusual among the children of the aristocracy. It was common for such families to retain a private tutor.

The problem was...

She had only been brought to the school last night, or rather at daybreak, and no one had yet caught a glimpse of her. Moreover, there was not even a single photograph attached to this file. Cécile wondered if there was something possibly wrong with this girl. Even so, there was one thing she wanted to set straight.

“Your jokes have gone too far, my lord.”

The marquis’ eye behind the lens narrowed to a thin line, perhaps out of surprise at Cécile’s solemn reproach.

“...What did you say?”

“How can you refer to your daughter as if she’s an animal? As an educator, I don’t feel this is proper.”

“Is that so?” The marquis sneered at her righteous indignation, then stood up. “I don’t give a damn what your feelings are,” he said cuttingly, towering over her with a malevolent, disquieting energy. Cécile instinctively rose from her chair and took a step back.

He grinned, and brought his face close to hers as she trembled in fright. “You may be a working woman now, but from what I’ve heard, you used to be the daughter of a nobleman. And so I will leave you, my lady, with a word of advice. My daughter is a beast. A legendary beast. Don’t try your luck, if you value your life.”

“A-are you threatening me?”

“Make no mistake. It’s not my anger that will shorten your life. My daughter is a beast. I suggest you avoid any foolish missteps, unless you want your throat torn out by a wolf. You should give it no more than the barest of necessities, and keep a safe distance at all other times.”

“A safe distance...?”

“Don’t go near that thing. Don’t let anyone go near that thing. It’s dangerous. Now, hear that? Somewhere out there...”

The marquis narrowed his eye behind the lens in an expression of apprehension. But his pale, thin lips were holding back laughter, as if he found something unbearably funny.

“The animals are howling!”

Although it had been a pleasant winter’s morning, the sky was steadily growing darker. Somewhere a dog was barking in a thin, fretful voice. A flock of birds flew away all at once, seemingly startled by something. Their wings rustled unnervingly as they faded into the distance.

“They sensed it arriving!”

“S-sensed what?”

“That thing. That beast. Yes, and like those animals, the world will soon awaken to that thing’s existence. Oh, yes, and when they do, they will wish they could fly at once from the face of Europe, just like those fearful birds just did. As will that worthless new breed of human in the New World, too!”

“M-my lord?”

The parlor fell back into silence. The marquis returned to his senses, and covered his face.

And then he turned to Cécile, who looked up at him in terror from behind her round glasses, and moved that pale, beautiful face of his close to hers.

“There are only three things that you must absolutely provide. A lady-in-waiting delivered these things while it was still in the tower, but from now on, this daily task shall fall upon you, my lady.”

“Wh-what are those things?”

“The first one is...”

The marquis narrowed his eyes.

The sound of birds flying away echoed again from the outside. On that peculiar morning, it felt as if all the animals of the school were attempting to flee, as if the natural world had been thrown into an uproar....

The Marquis de Blois murmured in a low voice. “The first one ... is *books!*”

three

[3]

As soon as the Marquis de Blois had left, the winter morning sky over the campus returned to its previously sunny and crisp state. Sunlight shone from the French windows into the parlor that had been buried in darkness, and the cries of songbirds echoed in the distance.

Cécile heaved a great sigh. Her tensed muscles loosened, and the smile returned unbidden to her youthful face.

“Oh, that was a shock. I had wondered what it would be like to meet a famous marquis like him, but to think he was such a terrifying person!” she whispered to herself while assembling her documents and walking out of the room.

Students were running up and down the hallway. As they passed by Cécile, the young aristocrats greeted her with a polite, but cheerful, “Miss Cécile, good morning!” She answered them with a smile, but from time to time would look down at her feet uneasily.

I wonder what kind of girl she is. Her own father called her a wolf. What on earth...

A few minutes later, Cécile would find the answer to her question.

Freshly-cut grass, delicately-ornamented fountains, and enormous, clearly artificial-looking flower gardens dotted the exquisite French-style garden that took up most of the campus. During springtime, squirrels would climb and dart between the benches and gazebos placed at strategic intervals, but now they were hidden, luxuriating in their hibernation in the distant forests.

A small building, only a few months old, stood deep in the gardens.

It was a colorful, and yet somehow odd-looking building, that resembled a gingerbread house out of a fairytale. That tiny house, with its first and second floors connected by a winding iron staircase, appeared slightly too small for any human to be living there. It was truly peculiar-looking, and seemed to have been

constructed according to measurements that were miniaturized from their proper size....

Cécile walked up to the small entrance, and carefully put her hand on the doorknob, whose aspect brought to mind the aroma of a freshly-baked muffin. It felt cool to the touch, chilled by the winter air. She squeaked in surprise at the sudden sensation, then collected herself, and turned the cold doorknob.

The interior of the gingerbread house—a villa hastily built for the daughter of the de Blois family, in accordance with their instructions—was permeated with a funereal darkness that put to shame the negative atmosphere in the parlor earlier. The air felt suffocating, as if draped by a dark, heavy shroud that was closing in on Cécile little by little. She gulped, and then slowly stepped into the darkness.

The inside of the house was crammed full of dainty furniture that appeared slightly shrunken down from normal proportions. There was a small chest bedecked with gleaming enamel embellishments, a green claw foot table covered by a charmingly-embroidered tablecloth and cluttered with small silverware, and a rocking chair sitting beside the window. But the tiny resident of the villa, the youngest daughter of the House de Blois—Victorique de Blois—was nowhere in sight.

Darkness crept through the house.

Sensing an intruder, the darkness languidly turned to regard Cécile, looming over her as if about to swallow her. Cécile's feet became rooted to the spot, unable to move. She narrowed her hazel eyes—and then caught sight of something amassed in another room beyond the darkness.

That something did not seem to fit with the rest of the cutely-decorated house.

It evoked a feeling of violent dissonance.

...She laid her eyes upon mountains of books stacked high in immense numbers.

The heavy, leather-bound books were heaped into many piles, crowding out the air with smothering knowledge. There were books of medieval religion

written in Latin, mathematics, chemistry, history ... all books that looked so difficult that even Cécile as a teacher would have felt reluctant to read them.

That sinister voice of the Marquis de Blois echoed in Cécile's ears.

The first one is ... books!

That meant the daughter of the marquis was somewhere in this darkness. Cécile swallowed nervously, then took a determined step into the gloom.

As she did so, she felt herself step on something. It made a dry crunching sound.

Cécile cautiously lifted her foot, then bent down to take a look at what she had stepped on. Her eyes crossed inadvertently.

Dusted liberally with powdered cinnamon, it was in fact ... a delectable macaron.

With a look of doubt upon her face, she squinted at the area beyond the darkness.

There were macarons, chocolate bonbons, and candies in the shape of animals scattered all over the floor, radiating in a circle around a shadowed figure. Cécile stood up, and remembered the voice of the marquis.

The second one is sweets!

And the third one is...

Stepping into the darkness, Cécile absentmindedly spoke aloud the word running through her head.

“Frills!”

Beyond the darkness was yet more darkness. She felt a negative force as strong as what she had earlier encountered with the marquis—no, much stronger. Seized by terror, she could not make a sound. She stood gazing into an abyss of true darkness, heavy and black, as if the gates of hell had been opened in that very spot.

Cécile halted, her legs trembling uncontrollably.

The figure in the darkness was staring steadily at her.

Cécile closed her eyes, and pricked her ears. She could hear a faint rustling sound. Whatever was there had noticed her presence, and had slowly begun to move. In her mind, she contemplated the image that remained from that split-second glimpse. Just as the Marquis de Blois had said, this was ... this fearsome creature was...

...enveloped in endless layers of white, luxurious frills.

Cécile slowly opened her eyes.

The figure was right in front of her. Cécile cried out in surprise.

Every thought in her mind vanished in an instant—that this was the daughter of the Marquis de Blois, that she was one of the grey wolves spoken of in legends passed down in this country for centuries, this unsettling darkness. Sitting before her, looking up at her with narrowed green eyes...

...was a magnificent porcelain doll.

Silken blond hair, flowing down to the floor in a shining cascade, like a velvet turban come undone. Small rosy cheeks. Emerald green eyes that glittered like precious stones. Her sumptuous dress, bedecked in French lace the color of ebony and countless layers of three-tiered white frills. A miniature top hat ornamented with coral sat upon her small head like a crown.

That porcelain doll—no, that tiny girl who looked like a doll, was lying upon the floor, her arms and legs sprawled out, her face remarkably expressionless and dispassionate, looking much like a discarded toy. The only movement came from one of her small feet, clad in lace-up shoes. It twitched once, then stilled.

The girl—Victorique de Blois—suddenly opened her green eyes, and gave Cécile an intense stare.

Cécile nervously opened her mouth, feeling as if she ought to say something. But her throat was dry, and she could not find the words.

Several moments passed.

Finally, the girl parted her small, cherry-red lips in an unnaturally abrupt movement, like a marionette with its strings being pulled.

“Who the devil are you?”

Cécile gasped. That voice was at startling variance with the girl's appearance, which reminded her of an ethereally lovely porcelain doll. It was a low, hoarse, melancholy voice, and made her sound like an old woman....

However, that strange voice was perhaps curiously befitting to the ineffable quality of light reflected in her green eyes—somehow sorrowful, and quiet, like that of an aged person who had already lived for a hundred years. Cécile was speechless with awe. And then she found herself once again overcome with fear as Victorique stirred slightly. In that moment, Cécile felt unease grip her heart, intuitively understanding what it must feel like to be a small animal in the sights of a predator.

“Are you my enemy?”

The husky voice asked her again. Handfuls of white frills made a crinkling sound, as if annoyed at Cécile's terrified inability to answer.

Cécile shook her head violently, still unable to manage even a single word.

At last she regained her faculty of speech, and whispered in a trembling voice, “A-are you a doll...?”

Hearing this, Victorique's eyes began to gleam dangerously. The greenness of her eyes seemed to intensify with her anger. “How rude!”

“Uh, um...”

“My name is Victorique de Blois. I am a fully-fledged human being!”

“Okay, uh...”

When Cécile attempted to speak again, what came from her lips was instead a shriek. Victorique had lifted up a heavy book with her small hands and thrown it at her. Cécile cowered as the book hit the wall with a heavy thud and slid down to the floor.

The room fell back into silence.

Victorique howled like a wild animal, her small body shaking all over. Cécile uttered a shrill scream, but it was drowned out by Victorique's howls. At last Cécile deciphered the words hidden in her wails.

The little beast was crying out, “I'm bored!”

“Wh-why...?”

“I’ve already read all of the books here. I need more. Lots more. Bring them to me. Bring me books. I’m bored. I’m so bored!”

Cécile turned her back on the terrifying girl, and ran away. She fled from the darkness, tripping over her own feet, escaping that house that looked like a toy dollhouse.

She timidly looked back. The howling had stopped, and now all she saw was merely a small, quaint gingerbread house, sitting by itself, looking lonesome.

Cécile fell to the ground in a stupor. Warm rays of sunlight radiated down upon her from the clear winter sky.

four

“Ouch, my back...!”

One month later, the long European winter was finally approaching its end, and people were starting to shed layers of clothing one by one. A giddiness in anticipation of Easter holidays had begun to infect students and teachers alike, lending a joyful air to the season.

Cécile thumped the small of her back with a rounded fist and staggered to a faculty room in the center of the U-shaped main building.

An elderly teacher, who had been teaching at the school ever since Cécile was a student, was already sitting inside. He smiled at Cécile. “You look about ready to collapse. What’s the matter? Getting a little old for this, are we?”

“Not right now, please...” Cécile stumbled to her own seat and slumped onto the desk.

“What’s wrong?” the old teacher asked, a touch of concern in his voice.

“No, nothing. It’s just...”

“It’s just?”

“Those books were so very heavy.”

The old teacher suddenly rose from his chair, preparing to flee the room. “Oh, so you mean... Well, it’s probably best if you ask one of the female teachers, especially one of the younger ones with more energy. Ha-ha!”

Cécile glared at him balefully. “I *said*, they were really very heavy!”

“Well, good luck!”

“Argh...”

Every day for the past month, from sunup to sundown, Cécile had walked to St. Marguerite’s Library to collect enormous quantities of books, then delivered them to that dollhouse, repeating the process over and over again. The student who lived there, the mysterious Grey Wolf Victorique, had not bothered to attend class even once, and had said nothing to Cécile other than ordering her to

bring her books—books, sweets, and frilly dresses. Victorique’s basic living needs were clearly different from that of the average person.

Cécile, for her part, had grown slightly more used to the sound of that intimidating, husky voice in the inky darkness. But as for that girl herself, it was a different story. Even when Cécile tried talking to her, she hardly ever responded. Cécile realized it wasn’t that the girl was ignoring her deliberately, but rather that Victorique possessed not the slightest bit of interest in other people. It was as if she had caged a wild little wolf that was not at all used to being kept by a human being.

Cécile could only keep praying that the wolf would at least not weaken and die... And that was all she could do.

And so several months passed.

The season shifted into the warm days of spring. Colorful flowers blossomed all over campus, and the trees grew thick with rich green leaves, transforming the gardens into a landscape completely different from the bleakness of the previous winter.

Before she knew it, Cécile had grown accustomed to caring for the strange little girl, who spoke not a single word and treated her as if she didn’t exist. Nevertheless, she continued to spend her days quietly delivering those three sets of things to the gingerbread house during her breaks from work. And all the while, she thought about that solitary, fearsome wolf cub, as if she were a little rose thorn that had pricked the palm of Cécile’s hand.

Feelings of worry for Victorique never ceased to occupy a corner of her heart.

five

[5]

At sundown, it was part of Cécile's daily routine to return to the spartan teachers' dormitory, located behind the chapel in an inconspicuous corner of the expansive campus. In contrast to the luxurious buildings elsewhere on campus, which were elegantly furnished in oak for the use of the aristocratic students, the teachers lived in plain box-like structures built in extremely spartan style without any excess ornamentation.

The faculty quarters were separated into male and female dormitories. Spacious rooms large enough for a family were located on the second floor of the male dormitory. A small pond lay in between the two square buildings, and every springtime, small birds would go there to visit, resting their tired wings on the way back north from their yearly migrations.

Cécile and her fellow teachers enjoyed leaving breadcrumbs in the pond to feed the birds. This served as a placid, calming ritual to signify the advent of spring....

On one particular night, Cécile finished her day's work and came back to the dormitory. As she rubbed her constantly aching back, she tossed breadcrumbs into the pond as usual, and flipped through the pages of the ladies' magazines she subscribed to, all while massaging small circles into her skin. She began chatting with a friend from her school days who lived in the room next to hers.

"I hear that the music teacher, Mr. Jenkins, has taken rather poorly lately," her friend said.

Cécile made a sympathetic murmur in reply to her friend's gossip.

Mr. Jenkins had been the music teacher ever since Cécile had been a student, and he was getting up in years. His health had declined, and he had recently been admitted to a hospital in Sauvrème, the capital of Sauvure.

"Once Mr. Jenkins dies, there won't be anyone left to play that harp."

“You’re right...” Cécile couldn’t help nodding at the sound of her friend’s somber tone. Mr. Jenkins was a talented harpist, and on weekend evenings would often invite other teachers to his and his wife’s room on the second floor and treat them to a fine tea party.

Oh, Mrs. Jenkins made some delicious milk tea, and those baked scones....
Cécile sighed wistfully. *And then those sandwiches with salmon and fluffy cream cheese. And her cherry cake...*

Realizing the direction her thoughts were taking, she blushed to herself. *No, no, his harp performance. Right, I should think about that instead. ...And those scones piled high with blackcurrant jam and clotted cream—no, not about that!*

Cécile struggled to banish the thought of a between-meal snack from her mind as she relieved her nostalgic memories.

“But either way, Mr. Jenkins will probably never perform again,” continued her friend.

“Are you sure?!”

“That’s because I heard that a new music teacher will be coming here next week. I hope it’s another good one.”

Now feeling truly contrite, Cécile thought of the kind Mr. Jenkins, who had always always been gracious to her in those days when she was a carefree student, even though her grades were not exactly the best. He was patient, taught the students to appreciate the beauty of the piano and of music, and was like a grandpa who always had a smile on his face....

Cécile slept fitfully that night. She woke up the next day at her usual time, ate breakfast, and then headed to St. Marguerite’s Library, her face clouded by worries and unhappy feelings.

Unsure of which books to take with her, she picked out five appropriately heavy-looking tomes, and hefted them up in her arms with a grunt of exertion.

Outside, a tiny bird tweeted a song in the sunshine.

Under considerable physical strain, Cécile walked to the gingerbread house as

she already done many times before. Just as she was about to turn the doorknob, which was shaped like a small shortbread cookie, the door suddenly flew open from the inside. She cried out in surprise when a group of students—blond-haired, blue-eyed children from aristocratic families—burst out of the house at the same time, shouting, “Whoa!”

None of them bothered to pick up the books that Cécile had dropped to the floor in her shock.

“Oh, it’s you. Say, what’s this building for? Why would someone build a dollhouse on campus?” asked one student.

Several children crowded around Cécile, who was gathering up her books from the ground. “W-well...” she stuttered.

“It’s full of books, and there’s nobody around. It’s creepy to have a dollhouse with no dolls in it.”

“There’s nobody around?” Cécile repeated. The students exchanged a look among themselves, then nodded.

Cécile felt her heart pounding in her chest. “Come on, it’s getting late. It’s time to get back to the classroom,” she scolded, trying to project anger through her voice as she shooed them away. Then she rushed inside the house and closed the door behind her.

There was nothing left but the sound of silence.

The darkness writhed silently, closing in on Cécile like a dark velvet blanket, just like it had every time she entered the house.

She should have been used to this atmosphere by now, this thick, suffocating darkness.

And beyond it...

Cécile breathed a sigh of relief.

Beyond it, she saw that girl, like a porcelain doll, sitting in her usual position.

She wore a lavish black and white dress, and a bonnet replete with floral-patterned lace upon her head. Her tiny feet were encased in leather boots fastened with fabric-covered buttons. Her long hair flowed down to the floor like

melted gold, curling around her small body.

“So you were here after all.”

Victorique betrayed not the slightest reaction to the sound of Cécile’s voice.

“Weren’t there some students in here just now? They said there was no one inside.”

“...”

“I’ll leave your books here for you. Later on I’ll bring some black tea, a soft-boiled egg, and cherry salad for your breakfast. ...Miss Victorique?”

She heard no response.

Victorique’s face moved with the tiniest suggestion of a twitch, forming an annoyed frown. Cécile sighed and quietly left the gingerbread house, but not before turning back to look at her one more time.

A warm spring breeze blew. A sweet scent from the flowers outside tickled Cécile’s nostrils. As she walked briskly back to the school, she thought of that small girl who was confined inside her house, ignorant of the warmth of the spring breeze, or the sweetness of the flowers. The little rose thorn embedded in Cécile’s heart twisted inside of her again. She shook her head glumly, and hurried along the winding path through the gardens.

And then one morning, several days later...

It was that dazzling time of year when the sunlight grew warmer by the day, heralding the transition between the end of spring and the first days of summer.

In the gardens, white butterflies danced upon flower buds as they bloomed open one by one...

That morning, with one hand supporting her back, Cécile walked into the faculty room. She sensed that she was a few minutes late when she happened to walk in on a middle-aged man being introduced to the other teachers. The new music teacher had arrived. He had graduated from a famous music college in Sauvrière, and by all appearances brimmed with confidence.

Once they finished exchanging introductions, the new music teacher called out to Cécile, who was preparing to run out of the room. He accompanied her as she rushed to her classroom, and questioned her about Mr. Jenkins. She replied by sharing her reminiscences about harp recitals and tea parties.

“Hmm, recitals. That sounds lovely,” the new teacher responded, making appropriate sounds of admiration.

“Yes, it really was. So everyone is really heartbroken to lose such a dear friend.”

He nodded. “I see. He must have been a fine person.”

The moment he spoke, a strong gust of wind blew past them. It was the dry wind of early summer.

Cécile knitted her brows, and raised both hands to rearrange her large round glasses, which had been blown out of place.

That evening, Cécile once again left St. Marguerite’s Library with a stack of books in her arms, grunting to herself as she made her way to the gingerbread house.

When she opened the door, she ended up bumping into a student who was in the process of leaving.

“You’re back here again, Miss Cécile?” The student curiously eyed the stack of books Cécile carried. Then she looked back inside, and glanced uneasily at the piles of heavy books which crammed the house in such tall stacks that they seemed to transform into extra walls.

“Oh, it’s you.” Cécile recognized the student, with her bright blond pigtails the color of wheat, as one of the girls in her homeroom class.

The girl narrowed her eyes into thin slits. “Why are you here again, Miss Cécile?”

This student had apparently come to the gingerbread house by herself today. Cécile fell nervously silent, uncertain of how she should respond.

The girl continued in an awed tone. “It’s a dollhouse with no dolls and no

people—exactly what I expected to find at a haunted school like St. Marguerite’s!”

“Well, no, that’s not exactly it—” Cécile stopped herself. “...Wait. Did you say there’s nobody here?”

“No, no one at all.” The girl yawned widely, apparently tired of investigating, and strutted out the door, sassily shaking her small behind from side to side.

Cécile lowered her books into the claw foot table, then went searching through the house. “Miss Victorique!”

She looked in the bedroom. But Victorique was not in the charmingly-decorated canopy bed, nor was she under it. Cécile then raced up the spiral staircase and ran into the dressing room on the second floor. She parted the suffocatingly thick sea of white lace, pink frills, and black ribbons, in hopes of finding a tiny little girl hidden among them.

“Miss Victorique?! Where are you?”

Cécile systematically looked under tables, inside closets, and even under the cushions of the rocking chair, as if looking for a lost kitten.

But Victorique was nowhere to be found.

“I guess you really aren’t here, then.... Where could you be?”

Cécile sank down upon a rectangular chest nearby, exhausted from her search.

The chest began to make a creaking noise.

In between creaks, she heard a brief, low moan that was filled with deep displeasure.

It came from under Cécile’s bottom.

For a moment, an expression akin to that of a dove who had just been hit by buckshot appeared on Cécile’s face, her large drooping hazel eyes nearly crossing together.

“...Miss Victorique?”

Cécile slowly rose from the chest, then took a close look at it.

Through a crack in the rectangular box, which looked too small for any person

to fit inside, she caught a glimpse of something.

Something white and fluffy...

Frills, which were apparently in a very foul mood.

Cécile eyed the chest suspiciously, not wanting to believe what she saw. She slowly lifted the lid.

Then...

An exquisite porcelain doll—no, a tiny, beautiful girl, enveloped in frills, lace, and calico ribbons—sat inside, a highly aggrieved frown creasing her face. She held a book in her arms. A lollipop peeked out from her smooth, cherry-red lips.

“M-Miss Victorique...!” Cécile cried out in horror. “Wh-wh-why are you in a place like this again? This box is meant for storing clothes. It isn’t somewhere for you to sit. Wait... Um, Miss Victorique, might I ask...” Cécile hesitated rather than continue with her next words.

Victorique, looking very peeved, huddled motionlessly in a ball, like a wild animal whose pride had been hurt.

Could it be that you were hiding...? Cécile thought silently. Are you afraid of people? You are, aren’t you...?

Victorique sullenly pouted, and showed no signs of wanting to come out of the chest for the rest of the day.

“Hey, mister, have you been busy lately?”

The sun was setting on a day close to the start of summer.

While watching white-winged birds float on the surface of a pond in the gardens, Cécile called out to a heavy-set old gardener who was hard at work.

The grizzled old man, his large frame draped with a pair of overalls, answered gruffly. “Yeah? What kind of question is that? Of course I’ve been busy. Imagine if you were the one who had to look after this huge garden day after day. Huh?”

Although he came from a humble background, Cécile had known him ever since she was a schoolgirl, and considered him a friend. As the gardener

continued to mumble under his breath about how busy he was, Cécile pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and said, “There’s something I’d like you to make for me.”

“Another toy boat or something, I’ll bet. All you want is stuff that’s a pain in the ass to make.”

“No, I don’t mean that. Actually, what I want is a flower garden.”

“A flower garden?!” the gardener repeated in bafflement. He paused in the middle of trimming a hedge, his enormous gardening shears halting in mid-movement. “Where do you want it?”

“Well, you know that little gingerbread house that went up recently?”

“Yeah?”

“I want you to build a garden around it. You know, like a lot of estates had in the Middle Ages. A garden maze. Something that winds around and around, where only people who know the way can get in. That sort of thing.”

“A garden maze!” The old gardener rose to his feet. His body, like a small mountain, shook merrily. “Hmm. Could be interesting. You’re saying I could make it any way I want to?”

“Yes!”

“All right, I’ll do it.”

Cécile sighed in relief.

And then she silently looked over her shoulder in the direction of the little house. A breeze was blowing, rustling the white flowers. The sun was setting, and the garden would soon be plunged into blackness. To Cécile, it felt as if the darkness that had suffused the inside of that house had come to invade the outside world.

The sky faded from twilight to nighttime.

The pale moon rose in the eastern sky.

With skillful hands, the old gardener began to plant a garden maze around the

perimeter of the dollhouse.

Geometrical patterns wove around and around the small house, and grew steadily taller, warding off any intrusions from curious students.

And then, around that time...

A certain incident occurred.

six

In the men's faculty dormitory, opposite the women's dormitory where Cécile stayed, Mr. Jenkins and his wife had left behind their things in their room on the second floor. In that lonely room, now sealed up and darkened, their belongings evoked the strong, lingering presence of those who had once lived there.

And then, every night from that night onward, the harp in that room began to play a peculiar melody....

Cécile was relaxing alone in her own room that night, filing her nails and shining her shoes. She found herself unable to quit after finishing with her own shoes, and decided to take it upon herself to polish the shoes of her friend living in the room next door. As she hummed while shining her shoes, suddenly she heard the faint sound of music being played invitingly from outside the window.

"Hmm?" Cécile looked up, and strained to listen.

But she heard only silence. She resumed her humming and shoe-shining.

Then the music began to play again.

"Huh?" Cécile jumped to her feet and opened the window.

She took a look at the second-story window of the dormitory across the way. The lights were off in the room that had belonged to Mr. Jenkins, and it seemed to be empty. But she definitely heard the sound of...

"A harp!" A chill ran down her spine.

Cécile went to rouse her sleeping friend from her bed in the next room. Her friend woke up mumbling crankily, then threw on her coat over her nightgown and ran outside with her.

"So Mr. Jenkins came back!"

"No, I doubt it."

"But I hear his harp being played!"

“In a dark room?”

Her friend laughed. “That sounds like something a ghost would do,” she replied absently. Then she caught herself and cried out, “Eek!” and exchanged a look with Cécile. “A ghost...”

“C-can’t be...” the two of them murmured, and shook their heads.

“That’s impossible.”

“I know.”

They entered the men’s dormitory and climbed up the stairs. They warily knocked on the door of Mr. Jenkins’ room, but no one answered.

The lights inside were turned off.

All they could hear was the faltering melody of the harp.

“Mr. Jenkins? Sir?” they called out in unison.

Before long, more people came investigate, and soon a crowd of teachers gathered around, loudly talking amongst themselves. As the harp continued to play, someone walked down to the office and retrieved the key to the room, then handed it to Cécile.

With quivering hands, she inserted the key into the lock, and hesitantly opened the door.

“Mr. Jenkins...?” she called out.

There was no answer.

The sound of the harp faded away.

“It wasn’t in this room, I’m sure of it. Someone must’ve been playing in another room,” one teacher muttered.

Cécile’s friend stepped over the plush carpet and turned on a lamp in the middle of the room.

The light bathed the room in a dim orange glow.

There was no one inside.

The crowd of onlookers simultaneously gasped. Her friend shrieked like a cat

whose tail had been stepped on.

“What happened?!” yelled Cécile in surprise.

Her friend stretched out a trembling hand and pointed at the harp.

Cécile’s eyes crossed. “Oh!”

The strings of the harp were faintly vibrating.

As if someone had been sitting next to it and playing only moments ago.

“A—a ghost!” screeched her friend. “The ghost of Mr. Jenkins! His ghost was sitting right here, playing the harp. That must’ve been him....”

“That’s impossible!”

“Everyone loved his performances, so he wanted us to hear him play one last time. Mr. Jenkins! Oh, how tragic! Our kind Mr. Jenkins must no longer be with us!”

“Don’t say that!”

An uproar surged through the crowd of teachers.

Cécile elbowed her way through the throng and raced down the stairs. She picked up the telephone and dialed the operator to connect her with the hospital in Sauvrière.

Mrs. Jenkins was summoned to answer the hospital’s phone. “All right. Oh, it’s you, Cécile, the one who’s terrible at the piano.”

Her uncomplimentary opening line slipped past Cécile’s notice. Cécile asked her through sobs, “Uh, Mrs. Jenkins. All of us offer you our c-condolences...”

“What?” the old woman answered bemusedly. “Your condolences? For what?”

Cécile wiped her tears. “Huh...? Didn’t Mr. Jenkins pass away...?”

“What are you talking about, Cécile! He’s alive and kicking! Right now he’s recovering in his hospital room and enjoying his dinner. What a rude thing to say!”

“What?!” Cécile hurriedly apologized, then hung up the receiver.

The new music teacher had walked over to her. “What happened?”

“Well, I called the hospital just now, about Mr. Jenkins.”

“The hospital?” A strange expression passed over the music teacher’s face as he repeated her words.

The next day, Cécile walked to the gingerbread house carrying a stack of books, her eyes bleary from the commotion over the ghost on the previous night. She wound her way through the unfinished garden maze, whose construction was making steady progress under the care of the old gardener.

“Oh, no!” Just as she was about to start crying from fear that she would become stranded inside the maze, Cécile finally found the outlet and arrived at the house in the center. She set the stack of books upon a claw foot table, now so tired that she could barely speak.

“Ahh...” She fell into a chair with an sigh of relief. “They’re so heavy!”

Later that night...

The same incident happened again in the faculty dormitory.

The harp played on in the empty room. When the teachers ran to open the door, they found no one inside. The window was also locked from the inside. Cécile’s friend approached the harp, and pointed at it. “Look, the strings are still quivering,” she murmured.

But when they called the hospital, they were told that Mr. Jenkins was getting better by the day.

And the next night, it occurred again....

With each time she heard the harp playing, the naturally timid Cécile found herself increasingly unable to sleep at night....

seven

Cécile could not believe her ears.

One evening, several days after the harp began playing at night, she gathered books for Victorique and deposited them on top of the clawfoot table in the gingerbread house, as was her daily routine. Just as she was preparing to leave, she had heard a voice call out to her.

“What on earth’s the matter?”

It was the Grey Wolf, who had uttered not a single word for the past several months.

Cécile halted, and then looked over her shoulder in wonderment.

Deep in the shadows, a beautiful doll, tangled in frills and lace, lay sprawled out on the ground in a position that Cécile had grown used to seeing. While Cécile was distracted with other tasks, a white ceramic pipe had suddenly appeared in the doll’s delicate hand. A thin strand of tobacco smoke swayed lazily to the ceiling as she smoked it.

“D-did you say something?” asked Cécile in a quavering voice.

“You seemed to be preoccupied with something these past few days.”

“H-how did you know?”

The girl snorted derisively through her small, finely-shaped nose. And then, in a voice as husky as that of an old woman, she said, “It’s really quite simple. An overflowing wellspring of wisdom told it to me.”

“Oh...?”

Victorique’s cold green eyes blazed brightly. Cécile gulped. Up until this point, this girl had done nothing else but skim through books with lifeless eyes, her small body slumped onto the floor. But now her spirit was seized by a terrifying, unfathomable energy that had suddenly been released out of nowhere. Her presence had been nearly invisible in that dark room, but in that moment, the one staring at Cécile was a being who possessed real power. Cécile stood

motionless, dual emotions of fear and awe warring within her.

“W-wellspring of wisdom...?”

“Correct. On occasion, I will collect fragments of chaos from this world and amuse myself with them, just to stave off boredom. Then I reconstruct them, and arrive at a single truth. ...Now, speak.”

“S-speak?” Cécile repeated tremblingly.

Victorique answered in a voice shaking with irritation. “Tell me of the events occurring around you. At the very least, you can be of some use to me so that I may forget this tedium for even a moment. Now speak, speak!”

Cécile gasped at the little girl’s words spoken in that husky voice, brimming with arrogance and obstinacy. But when Cécile opened her mouth to protest, her fear got the better of her, and she closed her mouth, unable to say anything.

Victorique snorted contemptuously, exasperated at Cécile’s continuing silence. “Or am I to assume the reason is a much more inane one?”

“Huh?”

“If, for example, you happened to be brooding over your wanton cravings for the opposite sex, then that would be a truly inane reason. In that case, I would rather you not tell me, Cécile.”

“N-n-n-*no*, not that!”

Cécile ran agitatedly over to Victorique’s side. Once she came closer to this strange girl, she began her tale of the peculiar harp, complete with wild gesticulations.

“...So that’s why all of us teachers have been living in fear. My friend said it’s the ghost of Mr. Jenkins, but he’s still alive. But what else could it be?”

Victorique uttered a short phrase in a low voice. “Move the harp somewhere else.”

Cécile regained some of her composure. “Huh? Why?”

“...”

And then Victorique said no more. Once again, she sank into her golden

darkness, one formed of books, thoughts, and boredom. No matter how many times Cécile attempted to recapture her attention, she said not another word. At last, Cécile gave up, and silently departed the gingerbread house.

When Cécile returned to the dormitory that night, she borrowed the key to Mr. Jenkins' room and relocated the harp with the help of her friend. It was a large and heavy instrument, with countless strings strung from top to bottom. For two women lacking physical strength, it was far too much to lift. All they could manage was to drag it across the plush carpet a mere twenty centimeters or so. Then they threw up their hands and returned to their rooms.

"So it's not supposed to play anymore? Why?"

"Well, I don't know exactly why.... But someone told me to do that, so I thought I'd give it a try."

The two women exchanged incredulous looks.

It was getting late at night.

And from that night onward...

The harp never played again.

The next morning was sunny, a fine day that foretold of the coming of summer.

With summer holidays soon to begin, a restless excitement was starting to spread through the student body.

Cécile walked briskly to the gingerbread house, as she had done so many times before. She put down her stack of books, then called out to the frilly doll lolling in the darkness. "Can you explain what happened?"

That cold and beautiful girl, petite enough to be mistaken for a doll, was carefully watching Cécile with her jewel-like green eyes. Every so often, she would bring her ceramic pipe to her small mouth, and take a drag from it.

A thin filament of smoke drifted idly to the ceiling.

“...About what?”

“The haunted harp. We moved it a little bit to the side, just like you said to do, and last night it didn’t play. But why would that happen?”

Victorique replied with a loud, weary-sounding yawn. Then, with penetrating eyes that brought to mind those of a wolf, she suddenly gave Cécile a steely stare.

Cécile shivered, frozen to the ground in fear. “Uh...”

“The man on the first floor was playing the harp on the second floor.”

“Come again?”

“I’m saying the harp on the second floor was being played by the harp on the first floor.”

“...I’m sorry?”

“Surely you understand this.”

“I don’t understand,” answered Cécile promptly.

Victorique’s eyes widened in surprise, and she sighed heavily. “It’s bothersome, but I’ll articulate it for you.”

“Articulate it?”

“I will explain what I have reconstructed so that you may understand it.” Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth, and continued irritably. “Listen carefully. A harp was playing in a locked room with no one inside, without even the lights turned on. And once you moved it, the music stopped.”

“Right.”

“Investigate the room directly below it on the first floor. You should find another harp there. When the culprit plays the harp on the first floor, that vibrates the instrument on the second floor.”

“H-how is that possible?”

“A harp is an instrument with many strings pulled taut from top to bottom. A sound is produced by plucking the strings. And the floor of the room where the harp is should be overlaid with plush carpet. The culprit made many small holes

through the ceiling of his room on the first story, which is also the floor of the room on the second story, and one by one, tied strings to connect the harp on the top floor to that on the bottom floor. And so, when the instrument on the first floor was played, the strings of the harp on the second floor were also plucked. When he finished his performance, he pulled out the strings that he had secretly strung through the ceiling. The holes in the floor of the second-story room should be thoroughly hidden by the plush carpet. Hmph, this is just one of the many worthless tricks that stage magicians have been using for generations. Just a bit of hysteria to fool children into believing in ghosts.”

Victorique muttered this disinterestedly, and once again, took a puff from her pipe. Her radiant blond hair undulated with every movement of her small head.

“But who did it, then...?”

“Most likely, the new music teacher.”

“Him?! ”

“Mmm. It is necessary that the culprit be skilled in playing the harp. That limits the number of people capable of pulling it off. And I believe you said that the first floor of that dormitory is where the single men live.”

“But...”

“I suppose he was envious of Mr. Jenkins’ popularity, and stirred up this fuss over ghosts so that everyone would feel frightened at the thought of him. Think about it, Cécile. Who else would have reason to do it except for that man?”

“ ”

“In other words, he was the only one who didn’t know that Mr. Jenkins was still alive.”

Cécile stared at her dumbly.

Victorique added in an annoyed tone, “Everyone else knew that Mr. Jenkins was recuperating in the hospital in Sauvrème. But the new teacher didn’t know that. He was probably under the mistaken impression that the previous music teacher had died. Cécile, didn’t he ask you about Mr. Jenkins before all of this happened? And you told him that you had lost a ‘dear friend’.”

Cécile gasped in astonishment. “N-now that you mention it...”

“And when you called the hospital in Sauvrière in the aftermath of the mess, he seemed to be surprised when he heard you mention the hospital. Since he didn’t know that Mr. Jenkins was in the hospital, he didn’t understand why you rushed to phone them when the incident with the ghost happened.”

“....”

“Do you understand now?”

But rather than give Cécile a chance to reply, Victorique instead slowly turned away from her, like a wild animal returning to the deep forest, and turned her attention back to her books once more.

Cécile stared mutely at her small form, so very slight, and so finely featured that she could have been hand-made.

Victorique said nothing more, perhaps no longer even aware of Cécile’s presence.

Despite the awe-inspiring, noble, and yet dark and unknown power that lay dormant inside of Victorique, the figure reflected in Cécile’s eyes was merely that of a girl in frilly clothes who looked like a porcelain doll. When she realized that this was the first time she had actually exchanged something akin to a conversation with Victorique, she became speechless with amazement. And then she quietly left the dollhouse, bewildered at the ever-present pain she felt in her chest, like the pricking of a rose thorn.

As she wound her way through the garden maze, what suddenly welled up in Cécile’s heart was the thought that, perhaps, the meaning of boredom was in fact one and the same with loneliness. She had no inkling of what was running through the mind of the grey wolf, or what would become of her. But the thorn only continued to ache.

And so spring headed into summer.

The long holiday had begun.

eight

[8]

With the start of the long summer break, the sights and sounds of the students vanished as if they had never existed in the first place, leaving St. Marguerite's School bathed in stillness and the radiant light of the summer sun. But there was a subtle change to this yearly routine, and it was not solely due to the presence of the Grey Wolf Victorique.

When morning came, Victorique groggily gathered up her frills and lace and walked out of the small gingerbread house, passing through the deserted gardens. Her destination was St. Marguerite's Library, one of the greatest repositories of books in all of Europe, stored in a square, hollow building, submerged in the color of ash. Victorique was the only student granted special permission to use the library's hydraulic elevator, which had been installed only a few years before. From morning until evening, she spent all of her time reading books in a curious alcove at the very top of the labyrinthine staircase, built for a king of Sauvure to indulge himself in his rendezvous with a secret lover.

The summer flew past uneventfully, and soon enough, it was autumn.

A traveler had arrived.

That morning, Cécile sat at her desk in a staff room on the first floor of the U-shaped main building, staring flummoxed at the stack of papers in front of her. She held her head in her hands and groaned to herself.

"Hmm... So this time, it's an Oriental boy...." She adjusted her crooked eyeglasses. "What'll I do if it's another strange one? What will I have to bring him this time, and where will I have to bring it? And just when I thought the pain in my back went away.... Hmm...."

As Cécile sighed to herself, she reflected on her mental images of what people from the Far East were like. *Harakiri*, inscrutable hairstyles, gorgeously-patterned clothing, dog stew....

“Right. I have to hide the dogs! He’s almost here!”

When she rose from her chair, her elbow accidentally knocked over the textbooks, exam papers, and assorted heavy books that were stacked up on her side of the desk. “Ack! ...Huh?”

Hidden behind the din of papers crashing to the floor, she thought she heard someone say something in a quiet, muffled voice.

Startled, Cécile looked beyond the jumble of books and handouts, and saw that someone had entered the staff room unnoticed. Standing before her was a diminutive young boy, his skin a color she had never seen before. His hair was jet-black and glossy, and his smooth skin was tinged with yellow. He had hastily reached out to catch some of the falling books, then put them back on the desk and began silently picking up the papers scattered on the ground.

Cécile stared at the boy in amazement.

...To the young aristocrats that populated the student body, the teachers were merely another category of servant. If Cécile ever dropped something, there would be not a single student willing to pick it up for her. As she looked down at him, bewilderment written all over her face, the boy swiftly picked up everything that had fallen and placed it back on the desk. Then he dusted off his knees and stood up.

He was small in stature and fine-boned, but held himself tall like an adult man. The boy stared intently at Cécile with a serious, inflexible expression, looking much like a young soldier.

His jet-black eyes drew her into their gaze. They were sparkling and moist, the same color as his hair.

Cécile scrambled back to her desk to review the documents she had laid out in advance. This boy had been sent abroad to study on the recommendation of his country, a certain nation in the Orient. His father was a soldier, and his two older brothers were already successfully employed in their respective careers. He was an honors student, the pride of his country, and had earned excellent grades at his military academy....

Cécile turned away from the dossier to the small boy standing before her. “...

Kazuya Kujou, right?”

“*Oui.*” Perhaps still unused to the sounds of French, he stumbled for a moment, a frown forming between his brows. Then he steeled himself, and stood up even straighter. “I am Kazuya Kujou. *Mademoiselle*, I am pleased to make your acquaintance!”

“Do you eat dogs?”

Kazuya’s upbeat expression suddenly deflated sadly. “*Non.* We do not eat dogs.”

“Great. The classroom is this way, Kujou.”

Cécile picked up her textbooks and began to walk away, with Kazuya hurriedly following behind her. His black leather shoes made a firm clack each time they hit the floor of the hallway, startling her with their precisely-regulated pace, as if he were holding a one-man march.

While walking down the hallway with her textbooks and Kazuya’s dossier in hand, Cécile compared the attached photograph with the boy marching beside her. The picture featured a stern-looking father in military garb, two large-framed elder brothers, and a slight woman, who appeared to be his mother, standing directly in the middle of the frame. Kazuya himself was ducking shamefacedly in the corner. Next to him, a vaguely flirtatious-looking girl with lustrous black hair and moist cat-like eyes was hanging from Kazuya’s neck, pressing her cheek to his. This was presumably his older sister.

The more Cécile compared the solemn expression on the boy walking next to her to the face in the photograph, with his dismayed look as his sister clung to him, the funnier she found it, and she burst out laughing.

“What is it, *mademoiselle*?” Kazuya asked, sounding puzzled.

“Oh, nothing.... Good luck with your classes, Kujou.”

“Of course, *mademoiselle*,” he replied, nodding with a stiff expression on his face. “I came to study with the intention of upholding the dignity of my nation. I am compelled to excel in my schoolwork and return as a distinguished adult who can serve my country. My father and brothers have all made this very clear to me.”

“What about your *maman* and your big sister?”

As soon as he heard those words, Kazuya’s gaze dropped to the ground, and for an instant, his face looked like that of a child.

“Hmm?”

“My mother and sister ... wept and pleaded with me not to go....” Kazuya looked as if he were about to cry. But he bit his lip and stood up ever straighter instead.

“I-is that right,” Cécile responded politely.

They reached the classroom.

Cécile opened the door, stood Kazuya in front of the classroom, and introduced the new foreign student to the rest of the pupils. The blond-haired and blue-eyed boys and girls seated in the classroom—the children of powerful families in Sauvure’s aristocracy—stared at their new classmate with uniformly chilly and aloof faces.

Kazuya Kujou would end up encountering many difficulties in his day to day life.

Asians were a rare sight in Europe in the first place, and the sheltered students were extremely resistant to the idea of befriending one at school. Kazuya’s serious personality did him no favors, and he was unable to make close friends, only narrowly managing to be recognized by others for his excellent grades.

Kazuya’s French, halting at first, gradually improved until he had no problems dealing with either conversation or schoolwork. He stubbornly devoted every waking moment to his studies.

From time to time, Cécile would remind him, “Don’t push yourself so hard. It’s okay to relax and enjoy yourself sometimes, too.”

But Kazuya would merely respond with a “yes, ma’am.”

And so the seasons slowly turned.

One morning, on her way to the main building after leaving the dormitory early, Cécile encountered Kazuya standing with ramrod straight posture in front of one of the flower gardens. “Good morning!” she greeted him.

Kazuya turned around, startled by the sound of her voice. He squinted his jet-black eyes against the bright morning sun and said, “Miss Cécile, good morning.”

“You’re up early. What have you been doing?”

Most of the other students were used to sleeping in until the very last minute before lessons started. When Cécile was a student, she was no exception. But she had a feeling that in Kujou’s case, waking up early in the morning and taking a walk was probably something very typical of him.

Kazuya abruptly pointed at something, his serious expression as rigid as ever.

“Hmm?” said Cécile.

He was pointing at a small golden flower blooming luminously in a corner of the garden.

“A flower?” Cécile asked.

Kazuya nodded in the affirmative.

“Do you like that flower?”

“Yes.”

“Ooh... You noticed it right away, even though it’s so small, and surrounded by a bunch of bigger flowers.”

“Yes.” Kazuya nodded. Then he suddenly looked embarrassed, and cast his eyes down. He softly murmured, “I’ll be off, then,” and turned away from Cécile, walking to the main building with brisk footsteps.

How strange... Is it so embarrassing to admire flowers...? Cécile thought bemusedly.

An autumn’s breeze, imbued with a cool dampness, lightly rustled through her hair as she stood in front of the garden.

“Who was that?”

Around the end of the following week.

In the midst of delivering a shipment of new dresses and sweets to Victorique's villa, Cécile paused. Victorique de Blois, who had said nothing for weeks on end, and resembled nothing more than a doll with an unchanging expression, had suddenly spoken.

"Huh?" Cécile blurted out, nonplussed.

Victorique snorted brusquely. "That yellowish fellow who came to the library today."

"Yellowish fellow?!" Cécile thought to herself for a moment, a doubtful look on her face.

Victorique, on the other hand, apparently had no desire to explain herself further, and went back to silently smoking her pipe and flipping through her books at an impressive speed. She read through ten pages of a bulky tome of philosophy written in complex Latin in what seemed like an eye-blink.

Finally, with an air of impatience, Victorique raised her head slightly, and reluctantly added to her description. "His movements were rather stiff."

"...Kujou?!" Cécile understood at last.

And then she remembered how that evening, she had asked Kazuya to find a book in St. Marguerite's Library. Kazuya had gone through considerable pains to locate the book, wandering up and down the library's maze of stairs over and over until finally finding it and bringing it back to Cécile. She thought he seemed to be a bit out of breath...

And at the same time, Victorique had been at the very top of that maze of stairs, in that lush conservatory, by herself as always, reading her books and smoking her pipe...

Cécile nodded. "That's Kujou, one of the foreign students. He's from a small country in the Far East, and he arrived last month to enroll as a student here."

Victorique did not respond. She immersed herself once more in the quiet world of books, with the sound of turning pages and the smoke that drifted from her pipe its only other inhabitants.

i wonder what's gotten into her. I never thought I'd ever see her express interest in anything other than books....

As she pondered this, Cécile left the villa.

The autumn headed into another winter. The bleak sky was cold and dry, saturating the vast gardens of St. Marguerite's School in a dreary grey. The plants had lost their green leaves, and now resembled nothing more than a forest of tangled branches, or perhaps the bones of a black skull. Bare rose bushes spread throughout the gardens like a baleful spider's web.

Sometimes Cécile would find Kazuya lingering in front of the same flower garden where she saw him that day. While passing by on her way to the classrooms early in the morning, she would glance to the side and see Kazuya gazing at that desolate flower garden, with a soft, strangely tender look in his eyes. It was a look that he never showed to anyone, whether during lessons, or when she sent him on errands to the library.

A golden flower had quietly bloomed there until the end of autumn. But now it was hidden amongst thin, dry branches, intertwining like spider's silk, left behind in a lonesome garden....

Kazuya would sometimes stand perfectly still, and simply gaze silently at the withered plants.

Kujou must be...

One morning, a thought arose in Cécile's mind.

I have the feeling that he must be waiting for spring. He's patiently waiting for that lovely shining flower to bloom again. Even though he always seems so stern, maybe he's actually a romantic gentleman at heart....

The grey sky of a European winter shrouded the campus like a dark taffeta blanket....

"How old is Kujou?"

Cécile rushed to the garden maze one morning to deliver breakfast to the villa,

sneaking in a peek at Kazuya along the way. When Victorique's husky voice reached her ears, she jumped and nearly spilled the silver tray carrying fruit, rye bread, and lingonberry jam.

"What was that?"

"...Never mind," muttered Victorique grumpily, turning away from Cécile.

A white strand of smoke floated aimlessly from her pipe. The little girl, enveloped in black velvet and white silken frills, paged through her books and puffed on her pipe. From time to time, she would shake her thin neck as if waking from a dream, and stretch out a hand to pluck a morsel from her mountain of sweets. Then she would pop it in her glossy, cherry-red mouth and munch on it.

"...Eat too much candy and you won't have room for breakfast."

"..."

"And Kujou is the same age as you. Both of you are in the same class for now. Although, you won't get to meet him if you don't show up for lessons."

"...Oh," Victorique answered curtly, in the same quiet, husky voice that Cécile had grown accustomed to hearing. But she thought she heard a subtle twinge of something else in that voice, like a drop of rosewater that had spilled into a lake.

The smallest drop of sweet water had dripped into a huge, murky pool, and it awakened a disquiet in Cécile's heart.

Cécile concentrated on Victorique's aloof expression while she looked down at her books. She again had the distinct feeling that something she had never seen before had flickered across Victorique's face for a split second. The sight of it made her feel uneasy. Cécile nervously adjusted her large glasses so that she could get a better look at her, but that aura of slight warmth that she was sure she had sensed had already passed from Victorique's small face, as cold as porcelain, vanishing to some hidden place inside of her.

What was that just now...?

The afterimage nagged at Cécile, but Victorique merely ignored her and said no more. At last, Cécile picked up her tray of breakfast and left the villa.

A cold gust of wind blew past her, and she quickly fumbled to close the front of her brown overcoat. She made her way through the winding path of the garden maze until finally emerging from it after some time.

The sprawling campus on the outside of the garden maze felt even colder in the European winter, which was imbued with a foreboding sense of darkness. Cécile quickened her steps toward the dormitory. Somewhere out of sight, she heard the dry crackle of dead leaves.

The weather gradually grew colder.

Kazuya Kujou, unused to the winters of Europe, caught the flu on one occasion. One day, he was so ill that he could not get out of bed, and so Cécile visited his room in the boys' dormitory to deliver the assignments that he had missed.

The room was so precisely organized that it felt lonely just to look at it. Furnished with elegant oaken furniture for the use of the noble-born children, it contained a large writing desk, bookshelves, and elaborately-ornamented cabinets. Kazuya, his face flushed, was lying on the bed in the corner, his sleeping body held perfectly straight under the covers.

The redheaded housemother anxiously paced the hallway, fretting over the foreign child who had collapsed. When Cécile placed the palm of her hand on Kazuya's hot forehead to check his temperature, Kazuya murmured something she didn't understand, in what she assumed was his native language.

He must be calling out to someone, thought Cécile. She heard him say two syllables over and over again—*ru, ri*. While she contemplated this for a moment, Kazuya opened his unfocused eyes. They were deep black, the color of the night, and felt as if they consumed all that they gazed upon. At first, Kazuya stared at her in a daze. Then, when he realized that the person sitting beside him was his homeroom teacher, he bolted up in bed.

"Try to get some more sleep," said Cécile, trying to soothe him.

Kazuya resisted for a moment, then obligingly laid back down. After this, he said bashfully, "I thought you were someone else. I apologize, Miss Cécile."

“Who did you think it was?”

“I felt the presence of a female, so I thought it may have been my sister.” Kazuya burrowed under the covers, sounding profoundly embarrassed. He continued, his voice muffled by the blankets. “I thought you were Ruri. Because when I was in my country, we were always together. Miss Cécile, her name in my language carries the meaning of a [precious stone](#). And even though she cried and begged so much for me not to go, I left her behind anyway. Now I worry about her.”

“I’m sure she must worry about you, too.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” murmured Kazuya. His head peeked out of the comforter.

Cécile called an old physician from the village to examine Kazuya. Even when the doctor gave him an injection with a large syringe, Kazuya’s face betrayed no fear, nor the slightest trace of pain. His expression stony, he gritted his teeth, keeping as silent and stoic as possible.

Right before Cécile escorted the doctor out, something occurred to her. “Kujou, you like shiny, pretty things, don’t you? Like the names of jewels, and...” A faraway look entered her eyes. “I remember how much you loved to look at that golden flower in the garden. It was so small, but lovely. When it’s springtime again, you’ll see it bloom. Right?”

Hearing no reply, she turned around to look at him. Then she saw that Kazuya’s face was fully flushed all the way to his ears, to an extent that could not be solely blamed on his fever. He squirmed silently, then finally said in a faint voice, “I really love the color gold.”

Why is that so embarrassing to him? wondered Cécile curiously.

Kazuya continued, “For a man to admit to such a frivolous thing, if my father and brothers found out, they would strip me naked, tie me up, and hang me out of the second-story window. And my brothers’ favorite magazine to read is something called ‘Monthly He-Men’. But as for me, I’m just...”

His voice trailed off forlornly.

“I’m just this plain, inconspicuous, dull man you see before you.”

“Th-that’s not true.”

“It’s okay. So whenever I see beautiful colors or flowers, it’s like I suddenly fall under a spell. I feel my heart being stolen away from me. Really, it only happens once in a while. But I keep it a secret from those around me.”

“....”

“Miss Cécile, I think the color gold is a truly lovely, marvelous color. There are no flowers of that color in my country. So when I saw that golden flower, I felt very touched by it. But it’s a secret... so please ... don’t tell...”

In the middle of Kazuya’s feverish murmuring, the injection finally seemed to take effect. His black eyes closed, and his breathing fell into the soft rhythm of sleep. Cécile sighed in dismay at the sight of him lying down rigidly straight, even on his sickbed. Then she gently rearranged the disheveled comforter and lightly patted him on top of the covers, imagining to herself that this would be what his sister would do for him had she been there.

“A golden flower...!”

As Cécile left the dormitory and made her way through the darkened gardens outside, a single image rose in her mind. That girl, like a small golden rose. And those striking, silent eyes that stared straight at her, lost within the blossoming flower petals that took on the form of frills and lace....

Victorique de Blois...!

Cécile walked through the garden paths, thinking of the girl who could be called a living golden flower. The winter would not end for a while yet.

nine

[9]

At last the dry, grey winter ran its course, and another spring came.

Victorique secluded herself in her villa as usual, only going out during the daytime to spend her days inside the conservatory of St. Marguerite's Library. The rest of the students attended classes uneventfully.

Thanks to a ghost story told at St. Marguerite's School of "the traveler who comes in spring who brings death to the school," as well as his black-haired and black-eyed visage, Kazuya's classmates had started calling him the Grim Reaper, which brought upon him no end of troubles.

And then, one day...

A murder suddenly occurred in the village. Cécile found out the same morning that Kazuya had been involved in it, and that he had been subsequently transported to the school infirmary, unconscious.

"Inspector, wait! This is unjust!"

Cécile ran through the first story hallway of the U-shaped main building, shouting a bold rebuke at the peculiar-looking inspector. That morning, on the village road, a government employee had been murdered. Kazuya just happened to walk by at that moment, and became an eyewitness to the incident, or so Cécile thought. But this strange man, sporting a bizarre hairstyle, seemed to believe that Kazuya was the killer, and he had come to arrest him.

He was a young and handsome inspector, his gorgeous blond hair inexplicably swept forward and tapered into the shape of a drill. Two deputies in rabbit-skin hunting caps—and who were, strangely enough, holding hands—stood behind him at the ready. The three men made for a slightly incongruous sight.

The policemen disregarded Cécile's fearless defense of Kazuya and dragged him into another room, whereupon they began to subject him to some form of questioning.

Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no! Cécile agitatedly paced back and forth down the hallway in a panic. She could think of no recourse for something as serious as a murder case, and was at a loss for how to rescue Kazuya.

But then she suddenly remembered the curious case of the ghost harp from several months ago.

No one could give an explanation for what seemed to be a supernatural phenomenon. Every night, the harp would play an ominous melody. But then a certain little girl, after merely hearing a description of the case, was able to solve the mystery in an instant, with pipe in mouth. Her existence sometimes seemed almost surreal, and yet, in that moment, she became someone tangible and true....

Cécile stood there for a minute, lost in thought.

Finally, she collected her wits, rushed to the staff room, and collected two batches of notes from today's lessons. She scribbled a name on each of them, then ran back down the hallway.

She entered the room where Kazuya was being questioned, and handed the notes to him. "Here you go!" she said, forcing a smile to appear on her face, even though her legs were shaking in fear.

The inspector predictably flew into a rage. "Out of the way, woman! You're obstructing the investigation!"

"If I could have a word with you, inspector." Cécile hid her quivering hands behind her back, and compelled herself to take a stand against him. "If you intend to treat him as a criminal, then please obtain an arrest warrant first. Otherwise, this is simply an abuse of your police powers. As a representative of this school, I must strongly protest!"

Kazuya followed her into the hallway, and politely thanked her. Once she saw him looking more like his usual self, Cécile thrust the stack of notes into his hands. "Don't mention it. Make sure to take this. You're going to the library."

"Th-the ... library?"

Cécile nodded. “Right.”

When she told him to take the notes to his classmate in the library, Kazuya’s face took on a slightly sulky expression. For someone as serious and studious as he was, the idea of a classmate holing up in the library and never attending lessons must have been appalling. Cécile pressed on, “Go to the very top of the library. That child loves high places.”

“Is that right....” Kazuya sounded a little disheartened in his reply. Then he said, in an unusually mean-spirited tone by his standards, “There’s a saying in my homeland, that smoke and a certain you-know-what like high places.”

The sight of his childish pout amused Cécile, and she couldn’t help but giggle. “Oh, Kujou, don’t say that.”

She gave Kazuya’s back a firm push, and added, “Actually, that child is a genius, you know....”

With notes in hand, and posture as straight as ever, Kazuya departed down the hallway, his leather shoes tapping out a loud, even rhythm upon the floor.

She smiled after him as he left.

After exiting the building, Kazuya walked in the direction of the solid, stone-grey tower hidden deep inside the sprawling campus. It was springtime, and in one of the gardens, the little flower that Kazuya had so loved was once again beginning to sprout a delicate golden bud. From time to time a warm gust of wind would blow past him, marking the return of a blithe and comfortable season.

Cécile watched Kazuya grow steadily more distant as he walked through the gardens, his head held up high. With the coming of spring, the bleak winter felt more and more like a distant memory.

He headed toward the secret conservatory at the very top of St. Marguerite’s Library.

And then, a short time later...

“So, it wasn’t enough that you were late to class, but on top of that, decided

to come play truant in the library? Of course, you may do as you wish, but at least go somewhere else so that you aren't in my way."

"Huh? ... Might you be Victorique, by any chance?"

As if waiting for someone whom she had never met, the girl Victorique, who resembled a small porcelain doll, with her golden hair dangling from the top of the library like silken thread, met the boy who had at long last arrived from his faraway island country after crossing the seven seas. He would become her one and only vassal and friend.

His name was Kazuya Kujou.

The year was 1924.

In a corner of Europe, adjacent to the French, Swiss, and Italian borders, was the kingdom of Sauvure, a small country that nonetheless prided itself on its long history. Deep in the most secluded part of the country, nestled at the foot of the Alps, stood St. Marguerite's School, a prestigious institution that may not have been quite as old as the kingdom itself, but still boasted of a long history of educating the children of the aristocracy.

And buried deep within the campus, at the top of the labyrinthine staircase in the huge grey library, was a marvelous place...

"If you are, then..."

Kazuya slowly took a step into the tranquil, almost dreamlike conservatory on the highest floor.

"I'm supposed to give these these notes to you...."

Victorique, puffing lazily on her pipe, snorted through her small, finely-shaped nose. "By the way, who the devil are you?"

Kazuya recoiled at the sound of her unexpectedly husky voice. And then, stiffening from the sight of her intensely beautiful, and yet queer appearance, he answered in a faltering voice. "I'm ... Kujou."

Victorique smiled slightly when she heard this. For just a moment, her expressionless face seemed to soften into something approaching mirth. But Kazuya did not notice this almost imperceptible change....

The warm spring breeze blew in through the opened skylights. A thin wisp of white smoke floated up to the ceiling from the ceramic pipe. The girl and boy gazed at each other, a short space between them, one sitting and one standing.

In that spring of 1924...

And so the golden flower and the Grim Reaper at last found each other.

A chain of cases would then unfold, from the motorbike decapitation case, to the mystery of the newly-arrived transfer student Avril Bradley and the book on the thirteen step, as well as the cases of the mummified knight, the great thief Cuiaran, and the explorer's secret heirloom, the Penny Black. Victorique de Blois and Kazuya Kujou would proceed to pursue the truth behind these, hand in hand.

But that is, once again, an entirely different story....

afterword

Hello, everyone. I'm Kazuki Sakuraba. I hope you'll enjoy my new book, "GosickS: The Reaper Who Comes in Spring".

It's my first short story collection. I'm so thrilled!

First, I want to announce something. The Gosick novel series is already up to its fourth volume! But in the timeline, the short stories in this book come before the novels. So these are the tales from the spring of 1924 when the protagonists Victorique and Kazuya first meet.

This work originally began as a single story participating in the Dragon Cup competition, which ran in Fujimi Shobo's monthly Dragon Magazine. Six writers each submitted a short story, and the readers voted in a poll to decide which one would get serialized. Gosick unfortunately did not win, but happily enough, was allowed to keep running, both in the form of short stories published in the quarterly magazine Fantasia Battle Royale, and as full-length novels. (I want to thank the readers for supporting me for the past year and a half! Thank you so much!)

The story that I submitted to Dragon Cup about the very first meeting between Victorique and Kazuya, who are already acquainted with each other by the time of Gosick I, ended up becoming the first chapter of this compilation: "The Traveler Who Comes in Spring Brings Death to the School"! I naturally hope that those readers who have already been enjoying their adventures in the novels will read it. And as for those who are reading Gosick for the first time, I would also feel quite happy if you were to begin reading from here.

The rest of the stories from chapter two onward were released in Fantasia Battle Royale. They tie together the period between the first chapter in this compilation and the first volume of the novels. After having just met, Victorique and Kazuya find themselves involved in various incidents, and get to know each other little by little. Their interactions are still very brusque at this point. Here you can find out the unexpected origins of Avril, the exchange student from England, which were not covered in the novel series. And then there are baffling

cases about a sinister purple book, a mummy knight, porcelain dolls that roam the night, and more!

And the story at the very end, about Victorique's past shortly before she meets Kazuya, is written exclusively for this collection and was not published in the magazine. It takes place in 1922, two years before the current time in the novels. Little Victorique, the "fearsome grey wolf", is relocated from the marquis' tower to the school. And Kazuya, at the end of a long ocean journey, finally reaches the kingdom of Sauvure.

I hope that those who have been following the series in the magazine will enjoy reading this new story.

So, for this afterword, I thought I would write some random tidbits about the story behind how I started to write the Gosick series. At least, that's what I had intended to write about. Still, over two years have passed since I started this series, and sometimes my memory can get a little hazy....

Well, if we're going to talk about the story behind my writing, that reminds me of something!

During Golden Week, around two months before this volume went on sale, I was called to be a guest at a sci-fi seminar event at the Japan Telecommunications Workers' Union Hall in Ochanomizu, Tokyo. The theme I was going to present was "How to Write a Light Novel". My editor Mr. K-dou from Fujimi Shobo was coming with me, and we enthusiastically discussed a bunch of things together.

The night before the seminar, while I was applying a facial mask and thinking of what I should talk about the next day, I suddenly realized, "...Oh, crap! I've mostly forgotten what went on when I first started writing Gosick!" In a panic, I pulled out stacks of notes from old meetings buried at the back of my work cabinet.

As I flipped through the pages in a frenzy... Some largely incomprehensible chicken-scratch jumped out at me, as if someone had left a mysterious dying message.

Below I've excerpted some of the parts that I found especially interesting.

“Miss Cécile is actually a robot.”

“She can go through awesome transformations just by removing her head! Because then you can swap out heads and turn her into a different teacher, right?”

“Avril can wield a saber. She’s good!”

“The suit of armor ran away!”

“The ghost inside the suit of armor is a friend ... of Kazuya’s.”

“Anyway, there’s gonna be lots and lots of perverts!”

Wh-what the hell...?

Who wrote these suspicious words?

(There may or may not be the vaguest of recollections in the depths of my memory.... I desperately want to make it someone else’s fault, and yet the handwriting seems very familiar.... Oh, man... total confusion.)

The next day, during the panel discussion at the sci-fi seminar, I hesitantly asked Mr. K-dou, “Um, so I found these notes...” and he said, “Huh?” and looked dumbfounded. Yeah, I thought so. I turned around and saw that the other guests looked dumbfounded, too. Yeah, I thought so.

But! I went through a couple sets of those notes, and slowly came closer and closer to the current world of Gosick, and by the fifth set, they weren’t weird at all. Hmm! Even I, as the writer, found it deeply interesting. I was startled, but overall it was a fun experience. (But I’m not going to show them to anybody. I’m making a beeline to the nearest river, so even if you find them floating in the water, don’t pick them up!)

I should probably mention this here...

Actually, since I ended up putting half of the sequel to the story of the stone lion thief that I started writing in the afterword for Gosick I into the afterword

for Gosick II, I wasn't able to put the continuation to that story in the afterword for Gosick III due to the number of pages, but apparently I'm going to continue it here, so I guess I will suddenly segue into the story of my grandfather, the stone lion, and the drowned dog (I tried to write that breathlessly).

Here we go... Sorry for the abrupt shift! But I'll begin now.

This is a story from the time when I remembered about the stone bookends in my grandfather's study, and then, with misgivings in my heart, got on a plane at the end of the year, and arrived at my hometown's airport, while heavy snowflakes danced in the air. (Really sorry for the suddenness...)

Stone Lion Theater (complete edition)

...This time I think I'll tell the story of "The Other Stone Lion Thief".

Perhaps the number of people who steal stone lions is shockingly high, because when I really think about it, there's another person very close to me who has done the same thing. Now, let us tell this person's story. He was someone unexpectedly close.

My grandfather.

On my mother's side.

I remember that everyone I ran into at Fujimi Shobo's year-end party told me, "Hey, where's the stone lion thief?" And I would think to myself, "Why should I bring her?!" My mind was full of stone lions as I returned home.

Feeling a little buzzed, I crawled into bed, and just as I was about to fall asleep, a single vague image floated up from the darkness.

Something weird-looking, whitish grey, with rounded lines...

Two weird-looking somethings...

Oh, I'm so sleepy. I'm falling asleep....

But their outlines were getting clearer. Hmm...? They look kinda like rocks. Oh, I see a face. What am I looking at here? This is...

This... This is...

I jumped up in bed. I was suddenly super alert.

“Hey, it’s those stone lions!”

Now deeply confused, I got out of bed and made a cup of herbal tea to calm myself, and just stood there with the mug in my hand. You know how sometimes in mysteries, when characters end up recalling by chance some unpleasant memory that had been sealed in their childhood? It was exactly like that.

Despite my agitation, my memories were starting to come back to me.

What I remembered was a room that looked like the quiet home library of my late grandfather, at his estate built among the mountains. My grandfather was a botanist who kept to himself. His library was enveloped in a peaceful atmosphere that just made you want to disturb it. In that room, ruled only by knowledge and stillness, there were heavy-looking books that looked like encyclopedias lined up in a row on top of a sturdy chest. And supporting both sides of those books were two stone grey bookends...

The problem was that these bookends were obviously not the kind that you can buy. One could not help but notice that these were none other than the so-called [stone guardian lions](#).

But then I reconsidered: memory is something that can be reshaped, and I might have just now constructed a memory of them being stone guardian lions, only because I had been thinking that they looked like them. So I drank my herbal tea and calmly went back to sleep.

But the next day, and the day after that, I couldn’t shake the feeling that those bookends in my grandfather’s library had to be stone guardian lions, placed there ever so casually.

Not only could I not shake the feeling, but my memories were getting clearer and clearer. Those casual-looking stone lions were ... well, not really casual at all, come to think of it. Actually, they felt really alive...

Curiosity was eating away at me.

It was almost New Year’s at the time, so I decided to ask my family about it when I visited them.

Getting there from Tokyo took about an hour by plane. I arrived on a certain day in December to a land of clean air, surrounded by greenery, with snow fluttering down on the ground in big clumps....

“How have you been? Are you hungry? That’s a nice skirt. How’s your writing coming along? Are your friends still weirdos?”

My mom was acting très nosy when she came to pick me up, but I wasn’t feeling up to it, so I just made some vague replies. Even after we drove back to our home and I went to the living room to rest, I was still feeling antsy for some reason.

The next morning, I finally got to visit the quiet manor where my grandmother lived by herself. I gave her a perfunctory greeting, then headed to the library, which had been left exactly as it was when my grandfather was still alive.

Filled with confidence that those stone lions absolutely had to be there, I opened the heavy oaken door, then...

“...They’re not here?”

The area on top of the chest where the stone lions should have been ... was empty.

I quietly left the house, wondering to myself if it had all been just a dream.

That night.

I sat in my parents’ kitchen, still thinking about my grandfather, his home library, and the secret of the stone lions. I agonized over it for awhile, and then, unable to get it out of my mind, decided to ask my mother. After all, she was my grandfather’s daughter (well, that goes without saying...).

I stood up behind my mom and called out to her, “You know...”

“What is it?”

“I was just thinking about something from a long time ago...”

“About what?”

“There weren’t any stone lions in grandpa’s library, were there?”

...Even I wondered if my question sounded too weird. *There weren't any stone lions, right?*

My mother, who had been humming to herself while preparing the traditional New Year's foods, suddenly halted in mid-movement, and her slim back trembled very slightly. Then, an eerie silence, full of tension and agitation, fell upon the modern, brightly-lit kitchen.

I held my breath and kept a close eye on my mother's back. The mysterious thing was that *she* had become speechless rather than her daughter, when I was the one who had uncovered those unpleasant memories. What's going on with this feeling of tension...

And then...

My mother turned to me. Her expression looked the same as ever, to the point of anticlimax.

She nodded vigorously, then cheerfully replied, "Oh, those? Your grandpa stole them."

Excuse me?!

My grandfather was a quiet person. He always wore a frock coat and a felt cap, walked with a stylish cane, and smiled often. He had been one of the so-called "[modern boys](#)" who grew up in the Taisho era. Ever since those days, he had always loved Westernized things, and his favorite foods were ketchup and vanilla ice cream (oh, I'm not saying he drank ketchup or anything, I mean like on [Napolitan](#) or omelet rice.)

On the other hand, he poured endless amounts of love into his plants, and got to be pretty renowned as a botanist. He was reserved, and there was nothing particularly out of the ordinary about him ... well, hold on.

Now that I think of it, each time he went wandering off in search of some plant, he would come back with some weird souvenir. In his quiet, tasteful library, I remember that you could find things like a Boris Yeltsin doll from Russia, or some mysterious kitschy grass skirt (the kind they use for hula dancing?). No, in that case, I get the feeling that it wasn't much of a quiet, tasteful library after

all.

Moreover, there was that time when he suddenly trapped a lost crow in the garden and decided to keep it in a cage as a pet. All he said was, “Well, I just wondered what would happen...” So from inside the quiet mansion, we ended up constantly hearing it cry out “caw!” (translation: help me!), but that only lasted about three weeks until it dropped dead.

Then there was that time when, with a big smile on his face, he suddenly threw his spoiled pet dog into a pond in the garden, and just said, “Well, I just wondered if it could swim...” I was a little girl at the time, and I was so shocked, but mainly scared, that I just burst into tears and started wailing. Then my grandfather, and my grandmother who came out to see what all the crying was about, both erupted into side-splitting laughter at the sight of the dog desperately trying to dog-paddle (actually, it was drowning!).

...I guess he really was a weird person after all.

He probably wasn't much of a quiet and refined old gentleman. No, he usually was, but I think he definitely had some adventuresome aspects which you wouldn't expect just from looking at him.

The more I thought about it, the more confused I was getting, so I asked my mom, who was busily cramming food inside containers, “He stole them?”

She nodded, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. “He said that stone lions looked perfect for bookends...”

“...”

“Pretty interesting, huh.”

“...Yeah.”

You think?

So, what happened to the stone lions after being stolen for the sole purpose of making nice bookends?

On New Year's Day, I again went to visit my grandmother, and the following is what happened. My grandmother and mother had a jolly time recounting the

tale of their “midnight adventure”.

As for the reason they called it a “midnight adventure”, this is why. After my grandfather died, my grandmother and mother started to think maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to keep something that belongs to the gods at home... (they had a point there) and the two of them took the stone lions and surreptitiously dropped them off at a nearby shrine.

They casually deposited the stone lions in an area of the shrine that looked like it could use some, and with a “Goodbye!” and “Thanks for staying with us so long. Take care!” ran away. And then when they passed by again a few years later, the aforementioned stone lions were solemnly ensconced in the same spot as if they had already been there for hundreds of years, looking comfortable with moss growing all over them.

“We did a good deed today, huh?” “Yeah!” said my grandmother and mother, smiling serenely at each other.

Is this a happy ending...?

But when I asked, “So which shrine was that?” one said, “It was so-and-so shrine,” and the other said, “No, it was that other one,” and couldn’t reconcile their memories, nor would each one yield to the other. Incidentally, both shrines were located in famous tourist spots, and didn’t seem at all like the kind of places where you could just drop off some stone lions as carelessly as you please.

Mother and grandmother said:

“What are you talking about? It has to be shrine A!”

“You must be going senile. It’s shrine B!”

“Oh, darn you! You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Ha, ha, ha, you’re getting old!”

My mother started to waver and say it didn’t matter which one it was, but the argument over which shrine it was continued.

It was rapidly turning into the very opposite of a happy ending.

Neither of them would budge an inch. My mother was getting a little teary-eyed, and my grandmother was laughing uproariously.

I burrowed into the [*kotatsu*](#), trying to block out all sights and sounds of the fighting. Eventually, the stress got to me, and I was attacked by a strong drowsiness. Maybe it was because I had been sipping alcohol all day since it was New Year's, even though I can't handle liquor that well.

I was roused from my fog by the sensation of being shaken from side to side, with my mother on my right, and my grandmother on my left.

"Wh-what happened...?"

"Get up. We're going out!"

"Huh? I didn't know you had plans to go out...?"

I looked up and saw my mother and grandmother on either side of me, glaring at me with their eyes popped out. I'm scared. Somebody save me. Ever since I was a kid, there had been times when the two of them could be even more childish than me. Painful memories ran through my mind like a kaleidoscope.

The two of them jostled me from side to side.

"Come on, get up!"

"The three of us are going to find out!"

I took a closer look at them, and saw that they had already put on their coats and even their scarves, and were completely ready to go out. Th-there's no escape...! However, today was still January 1st, and either Shrine A or Shrine B would be jam-packed with people paying their respects, which meant massive traffic congestion. Going and coming back from both shrines would take a good five hours.

I slid deeper and deeper into the *kotatsu*, and (although it may not have been very mature of me) pretended to be sick.

"Mom, grandma, my stomach hurts," I said in a feeble voice. The two of them exchanged a look and said, "Oh?" "Are you okay, dear?"

Then I delivered the clinching blow: "It really hurts."

Both of them suddenly assumed more adult-looking expressions, concern clouding their faces (sorry about that...). "Now that I think of it, she's been looking unwell for awhile now."

“Then maybe we shouldn’t go out...”

The two of them nodded even more regretfully. And so, this is why I still don’t know what happened to those stone lions, who were dredged up from the depths of my memory like a bad dream. Maybe it’s best if I don’t find out. I hate to see my mom and grandma fight like that.

Let all the bébés of the nation know that adults can end up doing pretty weird things behind your back, even if no one ever likes to admit to it. Now that I’ve reached that conclusion, this story is over.... (the end)

I-it’s done...!

Sorry for getting into that all of a sudden.... Sigh.

Now that I’ve run out of pages, this seems like a good place to write my acknowledgments.

So...

To all of those who have been of huge help to me in writing this, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all.

To my editor Mr. K-dou: although you’ve been busy as ever, getting things done with your incredible skills, I hope you’ll keep on helping me with reviewing and editing for the Gosick series. To the illustrator Hinata Takeda: once again your cute Victorique, costume designs, depiction of the campus, and everything else was awesome!!! I look forward to working with you again.

And to the readers with this book in hand, thank you so much! I am simply happy for you to read and enjoy this book.

My next one will probably come out around winter, which is when I plan to publish the fifth volume of the novel series. After the long holiday at St. Marguerite’s School ends, something long dormant begins to move.... The wheel of history has started turning. What will become of Victorique, and of Kazuya...!?

And right now, Fantasia Battle Royale is currently serializing the tale of the summer holidays that take place between volumes four and five of the novels. Various baffling cases befall Victorique and Kazuya, who were left by themselves

at St. Marguerite's School. The only thing that can solve them is a girl's "wellspring of wisdom". The case of the pony puzzle will also be answered in the story of this summer. Please enjoy both series of Gosick.

Well, then, thank you so much for reading up to this point. I hope to visit with you again! Sakuraba signing off.

Kazuki Sakuraba

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A Golden Fairy Inhabits the Top of the Library — Fantasia Battle Royale Autumn 2004

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